

Systematic Review of Trajectories Out of Violent Extremism: Toward a Model of Disengagement Based on Cumulative Disillusionment

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Abstract

Understanding why individuals disengage from violent extremism is as important as understanding why they become involved in it. While research has largely focused on pathways into radicalization, knowledge about exit trajectories is essential for informing secondary and tertiary prevention efforts. This review aimed to synthesize empirical research on desistance from violent extremism in order to identify key factors, obstacles, and turning points shaping exit trajectories and to develop an empirically grounded model of social reintegration. Following Campbell Collaboration guidelines adapted to the prevention of violent extremism literature, we systematically searched academic databases and gray literature for primary empirical studies on trajectories out of violent extremism published up to December 31, 2023. Due to methodological heterogeneity and the predominance of qualitative studies, the synthesis combined descriptive mapping with AI-assisted thematic analysis. A total of 149 studies met the inclusion criteria out of 14,863 records. The synthesis suggests that desistance rarely results from a single turning point but instead reflects the gradual accumulation of internal tensions and external pressures that generate disillusionment and, in turn, create openings for change. Sustained desistance is supported by relational and structural resources such as family relationships, vocational training, or reintegration programs, which provide alternative sources of identity, belonging, and purpose. However, reintegration remains fragile when individuals encounter stigma, social exclusion, or continued exposure to extremist milieus. Overall, the findings highlight that desistance from violent extremism involves the reconstruction of identity and social belonging, with patterns that overlap with broader desistance models in criminology and related fields.

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Introduction

One of the persistent challenges in studying trajectories out of violent extremism is the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding what desistance entails. The term is used inconsistently across studies, sometimes referring narrowly to the cessation of violent activity or the absence of

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criminal recidivism, and other times encompassing broader processes such as distancing oneself from extremist networks, reducing support for violent ideologies, or reintegrating into mainstream society (Altier et al., 2017; Horgan, 2009). Moreover, as with desistance from crime, exiting violent extremism is rarely a discrete event; it is better understood as a gradual and sometimes reversible process, marked by relapses or ongoing ambivalence (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). This variability complicates comparisons across studies, as desistance from violent extremism may be operationalized in multiple ways.

Disengagement generally refers to the reduction or cessation of participation in violent extremist activities, sometimes accompanied by social reintegration, whereas deradicalization implies a transformation in an individual's ideological commitments, often framed as the renunciation of extremist beliefs (Neumann, 2010). These processes are related but not equivalent. Disengagement can occur without deradicalization, as individuals may cease engaging in violence due to personal, relational, or structural factors while still holding extremist views. Conversely, ideological moderation does not necessarily preclude continued involvement in violence when situational pressures persist.

This distinction has important implications for intervention design. Some programs are explicitly framed as deradicalization initiatives and aim to promote ideological transformation through counseling, dialogue, or theological reflection (Koehler, 2017). Others prioritize disengagement by addressing practical barriers to reintegration, such as employment, housing, family relationships, or psychological support, without directly targeting belief systems (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025a). From a prevention perspective, reducing the risk of future violence does not necessarily require ideological change, particularly when directly challenging beliefs may undermine the therapeutic alliance. Many approaches, however, combine these strategies, reflecting the understanding that ideology and behavior are intertwined but not identical.

Despite definitional challenges, research on trajectories out of violent extremism has expanded considerably over the past decade. Whereas early studies were largely based on case studies or anecdotal evidence, there is now a sufficient body of empirical work to support systematic reviews. These reviews offer several advantages over single studies: they synthesize findings across diverse contexts, identify consistent patterns and gaps in the

evidence base, and provide more robust and generalizable insights to inform both theory and practice (Gough et al., 2012; Page et al., 2021).

Broadly speaking, existing reviews of trajectories out of violent extremism can be divided into two strands. The first examines factors associated with desistance, synthesizing individual, social, and structural drivers that influence why and how people leave extremist groups or abandon violent extremist activity (e.g., Silke et al., 2021). The second focuses on tertiary prevention programs, that is, interventions designed to support individuals already involved in violent extremism, to promote disengagement, deradicalization, rehabilitation, and social reintegration (e.g., Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025a). These strands are complementary; one identifies patterns and commonalities in the lived experiences of individuals exiting extremism, while the other evaluates structured efforts to facilitate that process.

Existing Systematic Reviews on Desistance From Violent Extremism

Brouillette-Alarie et al. (2025a) conducted a systematic review to identify “what works” in tertiary prevention of violent extremism (PVE) programming, clarifying outcomes, effective modalities, and implementation conditions. Across 17 studies covering 15 programs, outcomes were generally positive or mixed, but weak designs and short follow-up periods limited causal inference. The review distinguished belief-focused deradicalization from behavior- and needs-focused disengagement and reintegration, with more consistent support for the latter, including education and vocational assistance, individualized casework, and strengthened prosocial ties. Religious re-education and online outreach produced more mixed or iatrogenic findings. Therapeutic alliance, credible messengers, coordinated services, individualized planning, and risk-need-responsivity principles were associated with more favorable implementation, whereas resource constraints, staff safety concerns, and inconsistent outcome definitions undermined impact. Overall, the picture of tertiary PVE programs was cautiously promising but methodologically fragile.

Feddes et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of factors associated with radicalization and deradicalization using a three-phase model—sensitivity, group involvement, and action—that conceptualized radicalization as a dynamic, nonlinear process in which movement toward or away from violence may occur. The review retained 707 empirical studies across ideological contexts. Although it focused primarily on pathways into

extremism, it also identified factors associated with resilience and desistance, including critical thinking, self-confidence, empathy, feelings of safety and belonging, trust in government, guilt or shame over past violence, and continued ties with nonextremist others. The authors concluded that no single factor determines radicalization or deradicalization; rather, multiple influences interact across the individual's broader social ecology. However, the predominance of cross-sectional and correlational designs, alongside relatively few longitudinal or experimental studies, limited causal inference and insight into how these factors combine over time.

Windisch et al. (2016) reviewed disengagement from ideologically based and violent organizations across 114 empirical studies spanning terrorism, gangs, cults, social movements, and religion. They organized exit processes around push factors, such as disillusionment, internal conflict, unmet expectations, and negative experiences with violence, and pull factors, including family relationships, parenthood, employment, education, and broader prosocial ties. Three recurring patterns emerged across contexts: growing disillusionment, stronger intimate or familial bonds, and deliberate distancing from violent environments. Although the review identified substantial overlap across organizational settings, its conclusions were limited by variable study quality, reliance on self-report, inconsistent reporting, and the exclusion of gray literature. Overall, it provided a coherent descriptive map of recurring disengagement mechanisms across adjacent fields.

Grip and Kotajoki (2019) reviewed individual-level deradicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration in conflict and post-conflict settings, retaining 21 empirical studies. Their synthesis identified recurring influences including voluntariness, ideological commitment, education and vocational training, family and community support, economic opportunities, mental health and addiction, fear of reprisals, and exposure to violence. Reintegration appeared more promising when programs involved families and communities, tailored support to individuals' reasons for joining, addressed safety and stigma, and provided meaningful educational and economic pathways. However, the limited and methodologically uneven evidence base, together with compromises in the search strategy, constrained causal inference, generalizability, and the formulation of firm best-practice recommendations.

Axelsson et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review of prison and probation services for individuals convicted of, linked to, or considered at risk of violent extremism, retaining 27

primary studies. The evidence was predominantly qualitative, concentrated in Europe, and heavily focused on Islamist extremism, with only two formal evaluations of effectiveness. Three broad strands of practice emerged: building trust and staff capacity to discuss grievances and ideology; strengthening resilience through individualized case management, critical thinking, and broader identity development; and facilitating prosocial engagement through family involvement, housing, education, employment, and mental health support. The review also highlighted persistent dilemmas concerning prison placement, false compliance, and staff competencies. Overall, softer, trust-based, and strengths-oriented approaches appeared promising, but scarce outcome data, heterogeneous samples, and limited ideological and geographic coverage constrained generalizability and conclusions about effectiveness.

Finally, Morrison et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of empirical drivers of disengagement and deradicalization in the post-2017 literature. Based on 95 manuscripts and a thematic analysis of the 29 highest-quality studies, the review identified recurring themes including safe opportunities to exit, disillusionment, trust and distrust, family and intimate relationships, identity change, prison experiences, program effects, former extremists, security concerns, mental health needs, and reintegration challenges. Although the field had progressed methodologically, the evidence remained dominated by qualitative designs, short follow-up periods, and limited comparison groups, leaving the relative importance and sequencing of factors unclear. Building on the same evidence base, Silke et al. (2021) proposed the Phoenix Model, which organizes disengagement and deradicalization as a process initiated by actor-based, psychological, and environmental catalysts. These catalysts are filtered through individuals' perceptions of trust, the availability of safe and credible exit opportunities, and their assessment of whether leaving is practically viable. When these conditions align, the process may culminate in identity transformation and movement toward a nonextremist life. The model therefore offers an integrative account of how multiple influences may combine across the disengagement process.

Positioning This Systematic Review and Its Contributions

Positioned in continuity with existing systematic syntheses, this review broadens prior work on desistance from violent extremism by addressing several limitations in the literature. First, we extend the temporal coverage through December 2023, beyond the cut-off points of

most prior reviews, which typically stop in 2020 or 2021. This allows us to capture more recent and diverse ideological contexts, including studies on far-right, single-issue, and mixed-ideology actors, helping to counter the field's historical over-reliance on jihadist case studies. Second, we include both peer-reviewed and gray literature, with approximately 25% of our final set of studies coming from non-peer-reviewed sources such as organizational reports, dissertations, and government evaluations. This broader inclusion enhances ecological validity, especially for community-based or nontraditional programs often absent from academic publishing channels.

Third, while previous reviews have largely focused on identifying risk and protective factors for desistance or assessing program effectiveness, our goal is to move beyond correlational inventories toward a trajectory-based understanding of how disengagement unfolds. Drawing on desistance theory in criminology (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2001, 2003) and related fields, we apply a processual lens that highlights turning points, context-dependent mechanisms, and the dynamic role of factors that may function as protective in some cases and as obstacles in others. Our thematic analysis is therefore not limited to success/failure dichotomies but instead seeks to reconstruct the mechanisms underlying different exit pathways.

We then propose an integrative framework—similar in intent to the Phoenix Model—but grounded in studies published both before and after 2017 and explicitly informed by cross-sectoral work on desistance from crime and violence (e.g., Windisch et al., 2016). Finally, our review is practice-oriented: in addition to mapping facilitators and barriers, we identify factors that appear inert or overemphasized in the literature, and we formulate recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. We do not claim that our review supersedes existing work; rather, we see it as a complementary contribution that updates, deepens, and operationalizes insights from earlier syntheses in ways directly relevant to the design, delivery, and evaluation of secondary and tertiary PVE practice.

Objectives

To contribute to a process-oriented understanding of desistance from violent extremism, we conducted a systematic review of studies employing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches to examine trajectories out of violent extremism. Our main objective was to synthesize the scientific evidence in order to identify the primary pathways and factors through which individuals disengage from violent extremist groups or desist from extremist ideologies. Our specific objectives were as follows:

- 1) Map which factors appear more or less frequently across studies of successful desistance. A formal meta-analysis of effect sizes was not feasible due to the overwhelming proportion of qualitative studies and the heterogeneity of outcome definitions across the literature.
- 2) Identify and document turning points: key factors or events that appear to have played a particularly important role in shifting individuals away from violent extremism.
- 3) Conduct a thematic analysis to better understand how and why individuals desist, not only as an endpoint but as a dynamic, context-sensitive process. This was done by aggregating evidence on (a) protective factors and desistance pathways and (b) obstacles to disengagement.
- 4) Propose an empirically grounded theoretical model of social reintegration for individuals who have joined extremist groups (online or offline) or committed extremist violence.
- 5) Document methodological and conceptual limitations in the empirical literature on trajectories out of violent extremism.

Method

The systematic search strategy was guided by The Campbell Collaboration (2021) guidelines, particularly during the bibliographic search and manuscript selection phases of our systematic review. However, as Campbell Collaboration guidelines are primarily designed for intervention reviews involving quantitative summaries (e.g., meta-analyses), certain aspects of the data extraction, analysis, and reporting processes were adapted to align with the predominantly qualitative nature of the included literature.

Definitions

Desistance from violent extremism: We define desistance from violent extremism as an overarching, process-oriented concept encompassing both disengagement and/or deradicalization. Although the term “desistance from violent extremism” is not widely used in the field, we adopt it here as an umbrella term to capture the range of behavioral, social, and cognitive changes that mark movement away from violent extremist involvement. Definitions of disengagement and deradicalization are provided in the Introduction.

Outcomes and phenomena under study: Given the conceptual and empirical challenges in disentangling deradicalization from disengagement, we chose to focus our analysis on factors associated with either outcome, without attempting to isolate those specifically linked to one versus the other. Most studies do not clearly differentiate between deradicalization and disengagement, and even fewer distinguish the factors that may uniquely contribute to each (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025a; Hassan et al., 2023). Additionally, we did not attempt to reconstruct the temporality or sequencing of factors within individual trajectories, as the current state of the literature does not provide the consistency or depth of reporting required for such analysis (Hassan et al., 2025). Instead, our aim was to identify and categorize recurring components across studies (see below).

Trajectories: Based on the scientific literature in developmental psychology and life-course criminology, we define “trajectories” as sequences of events, experiences, and influencing factors that cumulatively lead to a particular outcome or phenomenon of interest: in this case, desistance from violent extremism and reintegration or reconnection with society. Trajectories serve as frameworks to depict patterns shared by clusters of individuals who follow similar life pathways (Krohn et al., 2015).

Components of trajectories: Because synthesizing entire trajectories can be analytically challenging, due to the complex, nonlinear interplay of multiple factors occurring in varying sequences, we chose to structure our analysis around components within trajectories that appear to influence desistance from violent extremism. Specifically, we categorized findings into two groups: (1) protective factors or pathways reported to facilitate desistance or reintegration and (2) risk factors or obstacles that hinder disengagement or social reintegration. In quantitative studies, this meant classifying variables as follows: (1) factors positively associated in terms of effect size with desistance or reintegration outcomes

and (2) factors negatively associated with these outcomes. In qualitative studies, this categorization was operationalized based on participants' narratives and the authors' thematic interpretations. Protective factors were identified through accounts describing experiences, relationships, or realizations that appeared to support desistance. Risk factors were those described as perpetuating involvement in violent extremism or obstructing exit efforts.

Turning points: Within the life-course criminology framework, turning points refer to particularly consequential events that have the potential to redirect an individual's life course in meaningful ways (Laub & Sampson, 2003). In the context of this review, we conceptualized turning points as critical moments or experiences that trigger significant shifts in beliefs, behaviors, or social roles, potentially leading to reduced engagement in violent extremism and increased social integration. When a study highlighted a specific factor or pathway as especially critical to the desistance process, we flagged that factor as a turning point.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify eligible studies of trajectories out of violent extremism can be found in Table 1. We included studies presenting primary empirical data, including indirect data obtained through the triangulation of publicly available sources (e.g., newspaper articles, biographies, public terrorist databases). Studies were eligible if they examined desistance from violent extremism or the social reintegration or rehabilitation of individuals previously involved in violent extremist trajectories. To be included, studies needed to explore factors, pathways, or turning points associated with desistance from violent extremism. All ideological affiliations and geographic regions were eligible, regardless of whether individuals had committed violent acts, provided the ideology in question promoted violence.

Table 1
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Included	Excluded
Primary empirical data, including indirect primary data (e.g., triangulation of publicly available data)	- Secondary data (e.g., literature reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses; references were checked, however) - Nonempirical papers (e.g., theoretical or opinion pieces)
<i>Outcome:</i> The study must be about disengagement from an extremist group or from extremist ideas (deradicalization) and behaviors, or about the social reintegration or rehabilitation of individuals previously on violent extremist trajectories	Studies exclusively about entry trajectories into violent extremism
<i>Population:</i> All extremist groups/ideologies are eligible, from all regions of the world, regardless of whether their members committed violent acts, provided that the ideas they promote must have a violent component	Individuals or groups with radical ideas that do not promote violence to enact changes
The unit of analysis to link with outcomes must be factors (risk or protective), pathways, or turning points in trajectories	Studies about exit trajectories that do not explore risk/protective factors, turning points, or pathways out of violent extremism
Official and gray literature are eligible, including organization reports, theses, and self-contained empirical book chapters	Conference proceedings and full books not organized into discrete empirical chapters
- Manuscripts in all languages are eligible (AI-powered translation tools were used if needed) - However, the search string was in English only	Manuscripts not found by our search string (official databases) or our gray literature search (Google + citation searching)
<i>Year:</i> up to December 31st, 2023	<i>Year:</i> 2024 and after

To reduce publication bias, our review included peer-reviewed articles, gray literature such as organizational reports and theses, and book chapters reporting self-contained empirical contributions. Full books were eligible only when organized into discrete chapters reporting separate empirical contributions. Studies published in any language were eligible, but the search string was applied in English only. Translations were carried out using AI-powered tools when necessary. Eligible studies had to be published by December 31, 2023.

We excluded studies based on secondary data (e.g., literature reviews, meta-analyses), nonempirical works (e.g., theoretical or opinion pieces), conference proceedings, and full books not meeting the above criterion. Also excluded were studies that focused exclusively on entry trajectories into violent extremism, addressed radical ideas lacking a violent component, or described exit processes without examining associated factors, pathways, or turning points. Finally, when systematic and/or literature reviews were found, we harvested the references of such reviews to ensure that our search strategy found all the relevant studies.

Search Methods for Identification of Studies

Official Literature

We conducted searches in a variety of bibliographic databases from the fields of psychology, criminology, and social work—some subject-specific and others multidisciplinary in nature. While the searches employed standard Boolean logic, they were tailored to the features of each database, making use of available controlled vocabulary and employing proximity operators where possible. The databases used are as follows: (1) Criminal Justice Abstract (EBSCO); (2) Dissertations & Theses Global Closed Collection (ProQuest); (3) International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (ProQuest); (4) National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS; ProQuest); (5) PsycINFO (Ovid); (6) Social Sciences Abstracts (EBSCO); (7) Social Services Abstracts (ProQuest); (8) Social Work Abstracts (EBSCO); (9) Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest); and (10) Web of Science (Clarivate).

Our search strategy was divided into three blocks. The first block comprised keywords related to violent extremism in general, as well as various types of violent extremist ideologies. We opted not to include the names of specific violent extremist groups, as compiling an exhaustive list would be unfeasible and would risk disproportionately representing certain groups over others. The second block included terms related to disengagement and desistance. For a study to be eligible, it needed to include keywords from both Block 1 and Block 2. The third block comprised terms related to deradicalization. Because the term deradicalization implies desistance from violent extremism, studies containing only keywords from Block 3 were also considered eligible. Taken together, our

eligibility criteria were defined as: (Block 1 AND Block 2) OR Block 3. Note that we initially intended to include keyword blocks related to trajectories, turning points, and risk/protective factors. However, these made the search too restrictive and resulted in false negatives: articles we aimed to capture but ultimately missed.

Searches were conducted in English, but no languages were excluded from the results. The search fields included title, abstract, keywords, and subject/indexing. An example of the search string inputted in the PsycINFO (Ovid) database can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Search String Example: PsycInfo (Ovid)

Keyword Blocks	Keywords
Violent extremism	“alt left” OR “alt right” OR anarch* OR anticapitalis* OR “anti capitalis*” OR antifas* OR “anti fas*” OR “anti islam*” OR “anti muslim*” OR antisemiti* OR “anti semiti*” OR blackpill OR “black pill” OR ecoterror* OR “eco terror*” OR ecoviolen* OR “eco violen*” OR “environmental* violen*” OR “extreme right” OR extremis* OR fanatici* OR “far left” OR “far right” OR fascis* OR “foreign fight*” OR fundamentalis* OR “hate crime*” OR “ideological* violen*” OR incel OR indoctrinat* OR insurgen* OR islamis* OR islamophob* OR jihadis* OR “left wing” OR (lone ADJ2 (actor* OR offend* OR wolf*)) OR “male supremac*” OR “mass shoot*” OR misogyn* OR neonazi* OR “neo nazi*” OR ((political* OR racis* OR religio* OR separatist*) ADJ2 violen*) OR radicali* OR (radical* ADJ2 (group* OR ideolog* OR left* OR movement* OR right*)) OR redpill OR “red pill” OR “right wing” OR salafi* OR “school shoot*” OR “scientific racis*” OR (suicide* ADJ2 (attack* OR bomb*)) OR supremis* OR terroris* OR (violen* ADJ2 (racis* OR separatist*)) OR “white supremac*” OR zionis*
Desistance/ disengagement	cessation OR defection OR desist* OR disengag* OR disillusion* OR leav* OR recover* OR reent* OR reform* OR rehabilitat* OR reintegrat* OR resettl* OR ((bring* OR journey* OR pathway* OR trajector* OR transformation OR transiti* OR turn* OR walk*) ADJ4 (away OR back OR out))
Deradicalization	derad* OR “de radicali*”

Note. Proximity indicator blocks are shown in bold to facilitate readability.

Keyword logic: (Violent extremism AND Desistance/disengagement) OR Deradicalization.

Fields: Abstract (ab), Heading Word (hw), Key Concepts (id), Original Title (ot), Title (ti).

Limiters: date (2023 max).

Other Searches

The supplementary search strategy was divided into three parts. Part 1 consisted of inputting the following search string in Google: “(deradicalisation OR deradicalization) OR ((desistance OR disengagement OR “intervention program” OR rehabilitation) AND (extremism OR radicalisation OR radicalization)) filetype:pdf.”

Google was preferred to Google Scholar to ensure a better coverage of gray literature. Search results were reviewed until five consecutive pages yielded only irrelevant results (10 results per page). Searches were conducted in Incognito mode to prevent user history from influencing the results.

Part 2 consisted of thoroughly searching the reference sections of secondary data studies (literature reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses) focused on trajectories out of violent extremism or factors influencing desistance from extremist groups or ideologies (including tertiary prevention programs). Accordingly, the following secondary data studies were examined for relevant material: Altier (2021), Altier et al. (2014), Axelsson et al. (2024), Doosje (2016), Feddes (2015), Feddes et al. (2023), Grip and Kotajoki (2019), Morrison et al. (2021), Neumann (2010), Silke et al. (2021), Windisch et al. (2016), Wolfowicz et al. (2020), and Zeuthen (2021).

Part 3 consisted of conducting backward citation searching, which involves reviewing the reference lists of all included studies to identify additional relevant sources that may not have been captured through the initial search strategy. We did not conduct forward citation searching, nor did we contact authors or organizations to obtain studies beyond those identified through the aforementioned searches or to request missing or supplementary data.

Selection of Studies

Study selection was carried out by a team of five trained research assistants who independently screened all records retrieved from the systematic search. Screening was performed in Covidence using a three-tier rating system (“no,” “maybe,” or “yes”), guided by the review’s inclusion and exclusion criteria. Each record was screened by two reviewers. Disagreements, defined as nonmatching decisions across raters, were resolved through discussion or consultation with a lead researcher, when necessary. Records marked as “maybe” or “yes” after resolution advanced to the full-text screening stage, which was also conducted independently by pairs of reviewers. At this stage, reviewers verified whether each study met all eligibility criteria and contained extractable data relevant to our outcomes of interest.

Interrater agreement was assessed during both the title/abstract and full-text screening phases of the review. We computed Cohen’s kappa (Cohen, 1960) to estimate agreement

beyond chance. Because kappa is sensitive to category prevalence and imbalanced decision distributions, which can yield low values even when observed agreement is high, we also calculated Gwet's AC1, a chance-corrected agreement coefficient that is more stable under conditions of extreme prevalence (Gwet, 2008). This is particularly relevant during title/abstract screening, where the large majority of records are typically excluded by both raters.

During the title and abstract screening phase, the average Cohen's kappa across reviewer dyads was .47 ($SD = .14$; range = .29 – .64), while the average Gwet's AC1 was .97 ($SD = .02$; range = .94 – .99). These correspond to moderate and almost perfect agreement, respectively (Landis & Koch, 1977). In the full-text screening phase, the mean kappa was .46 ($SD = .35$; range = .00 – 1.00), and the mean AC1 was .63 ($SD = .33$; range = .03 – 1.00), indicating moderate to substantial agreement.

Risk-of-Bias Assessment

To assess the clarity and reliability of included studies, we applied a risk-of-bias screening checklist adapted from checklists used in previous systematic reviews conducted by the team, themselves derived from the Appraisal of Guidelines for Research & Evaluation II (AGREE II; Brouwers et al., 2010). The goal of this checklist was not to rank studies by causal inference strength but rather to ensure that key elements of scientific reporting standards were present, with higher scores indicating lower risk of bias. This approach was chosen to accommodate the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies, which spanned qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, and varied considerably in their epistemological assumptions and data structures.

Studies that scored 2 or fewer out of 6 were excluded from the review, as the evidence they provided was considered too unclear, insufficiently documented, or too limited to support meaningful interpretation. At that level of reporting quality, it was often impossible to determine what the study actually measured, how data were generated or analyzed, or whether the findings could be attributed to identifiable participants, procedures, or contexts. However, this exclusion rule was not applied mechanically. Research assistants were permitted to make overrides, either including a study despite a low score when its substantive contributions were clear or excluding a study with a higher score if its reporting masked deeper validity concerns.

Data Extraction

To develop the data extraction sheet, we followed a three-step process. First, we reviewed exemplar quantitative and qualitative studies to identify the types of structured information typically reported in this body of work. This step involved mapping how studies described their data sources, methodological designs, sample characteristics, variables/themes, analytical strategies, and results, as well as how they reported limitations and recommendations. Second, based on informal literature reviews, expert consultation, and team discussions, we identified a set of core factors commonly associated with successful desistance from violent extremism. The list of factors is as follows: a) Disillusionment with the ideology or group; b) Lack of action by the group; c) Mental distress/stress; d) Internal group conflict or group dissolution; e) Deterrence (e.g., fear of being caught); f) Judicialization (e.g., arrest, charges, convictions, or incarceration); g) Family influence; h) Peer/group support; i) Life-changing event (e.g., birth of a child, marriage); j) Participation in a disengagement or deradicalization program; k) Education/counter-narratives; l) Employment; m) Religion; n) Guilt; o) Other factors with impact not captured in the categories above.

For each included study, we recorded in the extraction sheet whether a given factor was reported as relevant to participants' desistance from violent extremism and whether the authors identified it as a turning point. Third, to prepare the thematic analysis, we identified and extracted key interpretive statements made by study authors for each desistance factor, summarizing how that factor was understood to contribute to desistance in the context of the study. These statements were compiled in a separate coding sheet organized by factor type, which served as the foundation for the thematic analysis. We similarly documented obstacles to reintegration (also referred to as factors associated with relapse).

Data Synthesis

The synthesis of data integrates both descriptive mapping (e.g., study counts) and thematic analysis, in order to accommodate findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies. This approach aligns with best practices for synthesizing heterogeneous bodies of evidence, particularly in reviews where methodological diversity precludes meta-analysis. When meta-analysis is not feasible, methodologists recommend alternative strategies such as

narrative synthesis, thematic analysis, and descriptive mapping to structure and interpret findings. Sandelowski et al. (2007) describe the process of “qualitizing” quantitative data (e.g., study characteristics or factor presence) in mixed or narrative reviews and recognize study counting as a legitimate method for identifying recurring patterns—provided these counts are not misinterpreted as effect sizes. Popay et al. (2006), in their guidance on narrative synthesis, recommend frequency-based tabulation to explore cross-study relationships in contexts where statistical pooling is not appropriate.

In our case, a meta-analysis was not suitable for two main reasons. First, the overwhelming majority of included studies (84.6%) were qualitative, meaning that a meta-analytic approach would have excluded most of the available evidence. Second, our objective was to develop a process-based model of disengagement and reintegration, which required close attention to the interpretive and contextual richness of qualitative findings, rather than relying solely on outcome-level comparisons. Therefore, our data synthesis comprised the following steps:

- 1) Descriptive mapping (study count) of the most frequently reported desistance factors and turning points across studies. This frequency-based analysis allowed us to identify recurring themes, but it was not treated as equivalent to effect size estimation.
- 2) An artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted thematic analysis of how authors described the role of each protective factor in desistance from violent extremist milieus and ideologies, as well as obstacles to reintegration and factors associated with relapse.
- 3) The development of an empirically grounded model of social reintegration for individuals previously on violent extremist trajectories.
- 4) A synthesis of the recurring methodological limitations observed across the evidence base, incorporating both the limitations acknowledged by study authors and those identified through our team’s appraisal.

Thematic analyses were conducted according to the following protocol. First, for each factor (established before the AI-assisted stage), we recorded direct citations with page numbers or paraphrased content to summarize the substance of relevant passages. The coded material was then consolidated into a single Word document of around 200 pages organized by heading levels, which allowed the AI model to structure its analysis accordingly. Next, this

document was processed using ChatGPT as a support tool for the qualitative thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns, clarifying overlapping themes, and organizing findings across factors. We used the GPT-4o model in a ChatGPT Plus account in April 2025, testing multiple prompt formulations and document structures to improve the coherence, completeness, and traceability of the synthesis. The retained prompt stated: “I am currently conducting a systematic review on trajectories out of violent extremism and plan to perform thematic analyses based on the findings. I have compiled a document outlining the key themes that emerged from the included studies, each represented by a header. I would like to develop a thematic analysis document that covers all themes within a 40-page limit, with the length and depth of analysis for each theme being proportional to the amount of available information.” The outputs were then systematically reviewed and refined by the research team to ensure coherence with the original coding framework, accuracy in interpretation, and correct linkage of all information generated by ChatGPT to the appropriate article references. The synthesis for protective factors was written up factor by factor, whereas obstacles were synthesized without being subdivided. Particular attention was paid to interactions between factors and to divergent interpretations across studies, in order to reflect the complexity of desistance processes. Given the size of the coded corpus, AI assistance reduced the practical burden of organizing and synthesizing the material. All final interpretive judgments were nevertheless made by the human research team, which takes full responsibility for the statements presented.

The reintegration model was developed through a structured, team-based synthesis process. A preliminary version of the thematic analysis was circulated to all authors, including the research assistants, who were asked to read it in advance so that their contributions would remain anchored in the findings of the systematic review. The team then met for a two-hour virtual workshop using a shared whiteboard on which all participants could propose, group, move, and connect themes. Through collective discussion, the principal themes emerging from the review were organized into a process model that was judged to be consistent with the synthesized evidence and informed by the team’s professional expertise, including relevant desistance frameworks from criminology, psychology, and the sociology of religion. The lead author subsequently formalized the model and sent it to all co-authors for review and revision before final approval.

Determination of Independent Findings

Because the primary objective of this review was to extract process-based insights into disengagement and reintegration trajectories, we approached independence of findings differently than in quantitative meta-analytic reviews. In meta-analytic contexts, statistical independence is essential to avoid inflating effect sizes when multiple estimates arise from the same sample. In contrast, our synthesis relied on qualitative and interpretive insights, most of which cannot be reduced to single effect-size estimates and are not compromised by the presence of multiple publications stemming from the same dataset.

Accordingly, we did not exclude studies solely because they drew on similar samples, used the same data sources, or were authored by overlapping research teams. Because two studies conducted on the same dataset (or body of interviews) may pursue distinct research questions, employ different analytic strategies, emphasize different dimensions of the phenomenon, or present substantively complementary interpretations, excluding such studies would have risked discarding theoretically and empirically meaningful insights.

Therefore, we applied exclusions only when two documents constituted clear duplications, that is, when the same study was reproduced across formats (e.g., a government report later published as a peer-reviewed article with no meaningful additional analysis or data). In these rare instances, we retained the most complete version for synthesis while keeping all versions in our documentation for transparency.

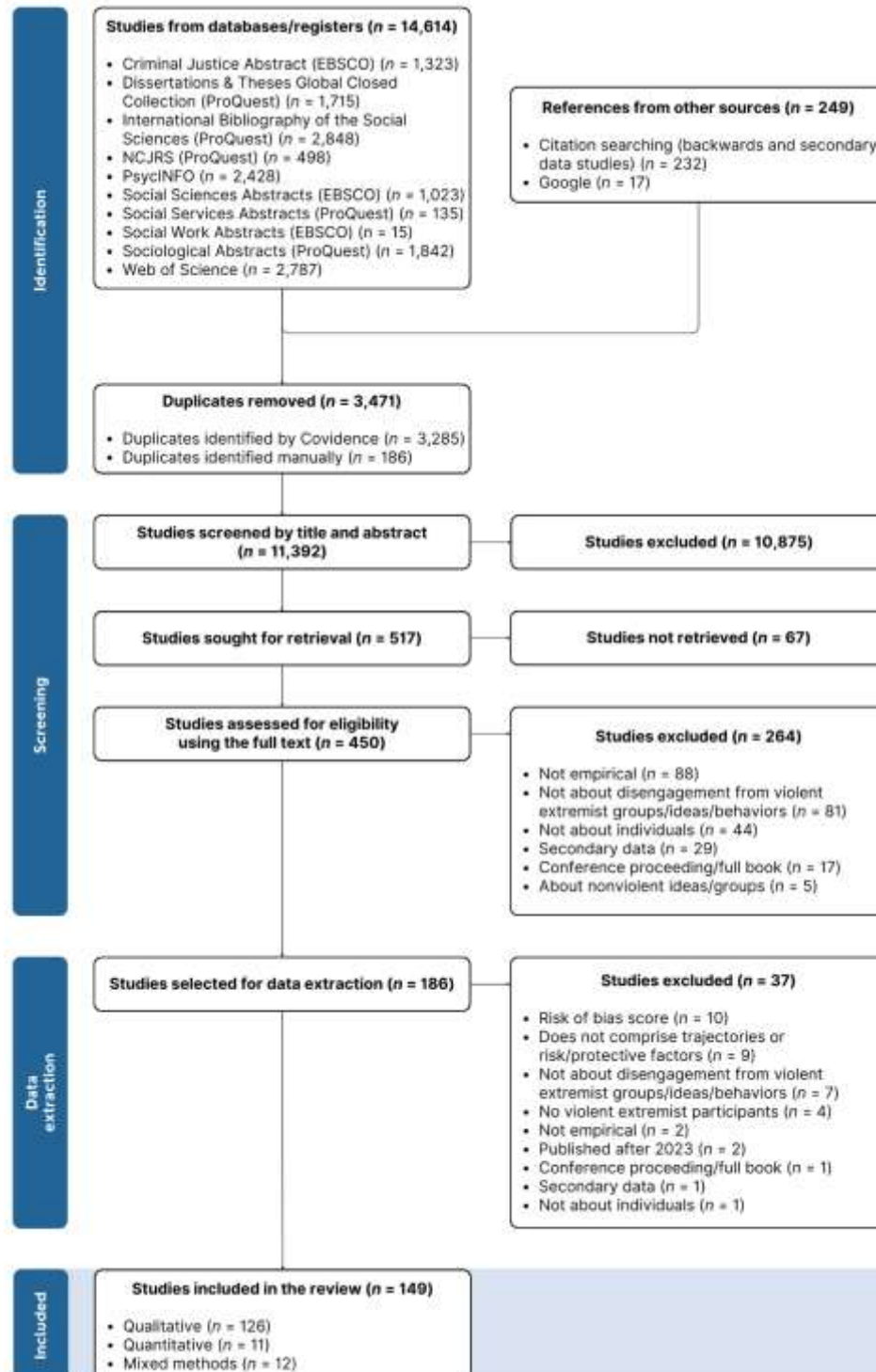
Results

PRISMA Statement and Description of Search Results

The search strategy yielded 14,863 references in total, including 14,614 records from academic databases and registers and 249 from gray literature and citation searching. After removing 3,471 duplicates, 11,392 unique records remained for screening. Of these, 10,875 were excluded at the title and abstract stage, and 67 records could not be retrieved. A total of 450 studies were assessed in full text. Of these, 264 were excluded for not meeting one or more inclusion criteria. This resulted in 186 records entering the coding phase, of which 37 were later excluded following further assessment, including 10 due to risk of bias. These records generally lacked sufficient information about the sample, data sources, analytical

procedures, or how the findings were derived. Ultimately, 149 manuscripts were included in the review: 126 qualitative, 11 quantitative, and 12 mixed-methods studies. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram.

Figure 1
PRISMA Statement



Summary of the Evidence

The Summary of the Evidence in Table 3 presents an overview of all 149 studies included in the systematic review. For each study, the table documents the sample, ideological context, data sources, and study design, alongside the desistance-related factors identified, the obstacles to reintegration reported, and the corresponding risk-of-bias score. In addition, asterisks highlight factors identified by study authors as turning points, that is, particularly influential catalysts or obstacles to the desistance process.

Across the 149 included studies, the evidence base was mostly qualitative. A total of 126 studies (84.6%) relied primarily on qualitative methods, while 11 (7.4%) were quantitative and 12 (8.1%) adopted mixed-methods approaches. Sample sizes varied considerably depending on whether the data came from individual participants or large-scale digital sources. Among studies with participant samples ($k = 133$), the median sample size was 20 ($M = 246.9$, $SD = 1707.3$), with a range from 1 to 19,504 individuals. For the four studies using nonparticipant data sources (e.g., social media), the median sample size was 5,985.5 ($M = 3,788,228.8$, $SD = 7,568,427.5$), ranging from 77 to over 15 million observations. In terms of data sources, most studies (81.9%) involved direct meetings with participants, either through interviews or ethnographic engagement. More than a quarter (28.2%) relied on publicly available/open-source data, 16.1% drew on private institutional records, 9.4% used surveys, and only one study (0.7%) relied on online big-data sources.

Ideologically, more than half of the studies focused on religiously motivated extremism (51.8%), followed by right-wing extremism (39.0%), nationalist extremism (14.9%), and left-wing extremism (14.2%). Male supremacy accounted for 3.5% of the sample. Notably, 14.1% of the studies included more than one ideological category.

Table 3
Summary of the Evidence for Studies on Trajectories Out of Violent Extremism (k = 149)

					Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Abdelgawad & Magued (2023)	48	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X										X	X		X	N/A	4
Accornero (2019)	22	Left-wing	Meetings with participants, Surveys	Narrative research, Bibliographical research (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis)	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X						-Strong material and emotional ties to political groups -Authoritarian repression	5
Ahmad (2016)	18	N/A	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)		X	X			X					X	X			N/A	6
Aho (1988)	6	Right-wing	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Ethnographic study, Narrative research (Unstructured)	X	X*	X	X	X		X	X		X			X	X	N/A	3
Ali-Fauzi & Kartika (2024)	35	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study (Thematic analysis)	X*	X*	X*				X	X	X	X		X	X*		-Continued support from radical peers -Family or social pressure to remain involved -Strong ideological commitment -Police brutality and perceived injustice	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence		
Altier et al. (2017)	87	Nationalist, Left-wing, Right-wing, Religiously motivated, Single-issue	Publicly available data	Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Bivariate)	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X			X	-Difficulty coping post-exit	6
Amghar & Khadiyatoulah (2017)	N/A	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)	X*	X	X					X*	X*	X*			X*	N/A	5
Ashour (2007)	100+	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)							X							N/A	4
Ashour (2011)	N/A	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)							X							N/A	4
Azam & Fatima (2017)	67	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)											X			N/A	5
Barkindo & Bryans (2016)	45	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study, Ethnographic study (Thematic analysis)	X					X					X	X		N/A	6
Barrelle (2015)	22	Religiously motivated, Right-wing, Nationalist, Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology (Thematic analysis)		X		X			X							N/A	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Baudon (2017)	76	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study (N/A)	X				X								X		N/A	6
Bérubé et al. (2019)	10	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X	X	X								X		-Fear of consequences from the group affecting personal or family safety -Isolation experienced after exit	4
Björge (2009)	50	Right-wing, Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis)		X	X*	X	X				X*				X	X	-Social isolation -Stigmatization	6
Bonino (2020)	5	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study (Thematic analysis)	X			X									X		N/A	5
Bont (2021)	10	Nationalist	Publicly available data	Phenomenology (Textual/content analysis)	X*			X									X		N/A	5
Botto & Gottzén (2024)	30	Male supremacy	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X												X	X	-Persistent influence of red pill-related misogyny after disengagement	5

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	
Brown (2021)	32	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*	X	X	X*											5
																		-Punitive interventions -Missing the thrill and psychological benefits of radical group involvement -Post-exit social isolation and destabilizing life events promoting relapse	
Brown et al. (2021)	32	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data, Surveys	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X			X		X	X				X				6
																			-Post-exit social isolation -Political events reigniting radical beliefs or obstructing disengagement -Failed family interventions or overly confrontational approaches -Punitive actions by law enforcement reinforcing extremist commitment

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Bubolz & Simi (2015)	34	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research, Ethnography (Thematic analysis)		X	X	X			X	X				X			-Ideological relapses after disengagement -Difficulty breaking free from prior belief systems -Continued influence of movement-related ideology on thought patterns	5
Carroll II (2022)	18	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Grounded theorization)	X*	X*		X	X*	X		X			X	X	X		-Social isolation -Unemployment -Housing instability -Lack of appropriate support services	6
Chalmers (2017)	70	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)			X			X	X			X	X				N/A	3
Chandra (2017)	7	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study (Grounded theorization)		X				X			X						N/A	5
Cherney (2018)	12	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X		X	X		X			X	X	X	X			N/A	6
Cherney (2020)	3	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study (Textual/content analysis)	X*	X*	X*	X		X*	X		X	X*	X*				N/A	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Cherney & Belton (2020)	3	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study (Textual/content analysis)	X	X	X*	X		X*	X		X	X*	X*				-Continued association with extremist peers -Resistance to ideological change -Lack of social or family support -Psychological distress, including emotional instability, trauma, and difficulties coping with stress -Limited participation in disengagement programs	6
<i>Cherney & Belton (2023)</i>	20	N/A	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study, Cross-sectional (Textual/content analysis, Descriptive, Bivariate)											X				N/A	6
Cherney et al. (2021)	5	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis)	X		X	X	X		X			X	X				-Fear of group retaliation affecting personal or family safety -Isolation experienced after leaving the group	6

					Factors associated with desistance															
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
Christensen (2015)	23	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Ethnographic study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)		X					X				X				N/A	5
Christensen (2019)	15	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Ethnographic study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X						X				X				-Identity struggles -Missing extremist lifestyle and group (support, prestige) -Stigmatization	3
Clubb (2014)	N/A	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Grounded theorization)	X	X				X		X			X				N/A	5
Corner & Gill (2020)	97 autobiographies	Nationalist, Left-wing, Right-wing, Religiously motivated, Single-issue	Publicly available data	Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Bivariate)	X		X	X*				X		X			X		-Psychological distress -Social stigma and discrimination -Lack of emotional or material support -Persistent ideological commitment -Lack of cognitive deradicalization -Unresolved trauma and mental health issues	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Corner et al. (2022)	91	Nationalist, Left-wing, Right-wing, Religiously motivated, Single-issue	Publicly available data	Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Textual/content analysis, Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate)	X*	X	X	X*				X*	X			X*	X*		-Psychological resilience -Fear of repercussions* -Physical illness	6
Curiel et al. (2023)	275	Left-wing	Surveys	Randomized control trial, Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Multivariate)						X									N/A	6
da Silva et al. (2018)	1	Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)	X					X							X		N/A	4
da Silva et al. (2019)	2	Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X		X											X	N/A	6
da Silva et al. (2020)	1	Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X			X	X			X						X	N/A	4
Davolio & Villiger (2019)	2	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis)	X	X									X				-Fear of consequences on the ex-group	6
de Boer (2007)	16	Unknown	Meetings with participants	Narrative research, Phenomenology (Textual/content analysis)	X	X	X	X	X	X									-Feelings of loneliness -Sense of inadequacy in the non-extremist world -Lack of validation -Consistent fear -Feeling inauthentic or "fake"	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
de Graaf & Weggemans (2016)	37	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Narrative research, Exploratory (Thematic analysis)		X	X							X					-Social isolation and distrust toward society -Radicalized peer influence -Lack of preparation for release -Public stigmatization -Lack of trust in institutions	6
Decker & Pyrooz (2020)	802	N/A	Surveys	Cohort/longitudinal (Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate)							X*								N/A	6
Demant et al. (2008)	23	Right-wing, Left-wing, Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X		X		X		X*	X	X				X		-Threats and violent consequences from the group -No "normal life" outside their extremist life -Pressure from the group to come back -Lack of support from society -Stigmatization	4
DeMichele et al. (2021)	47	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Grounded theorization)	X						X					X	X		N/A	5

					Factors associated with desistance														Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group		Obstacles to reintegration
Duriesmith & Ismail (2024)	3	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Life stories (Thematic analysis)			X			X	X					X	X		N/A	6
Dwyer (2013)	N/A	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Surveys	Case study, Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Thematic analysis, Descriptive)															-Employment barriers -Social stigma -Political identity -Legal restrictions	5
Elofson (2017)	9	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology (Thematic analysis)	X	X			X							X			N/A	6
Emser et al. (2022)	16	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X				-Stigmatization following release from prison -Continued contact with extremist groups	6
Ferguson (2016)	11	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology, Case study (Thematic analysis)			X	X	X*	X	X*								-Stigmatization and barriers to reintegration	4
Ferguson et al. (2015)	11	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Interpretative phenomenological analysis)	X		X	X			X	X	X	X			X		N/A	6
Fisher Smith & Sullivan (2022)	1	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X												-Fear of reprisal -Fear of feeling lost after leaving	5
Fisher-Smith et al. (2020)	8	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology (Thematic analysis)	X	X			X										N/A	5

					Factors associated with desistance														Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group		
Flack & Ferguson (2021)	35	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)		X		X		X*	X*	X							N/A	6
Florez-Morris (2005)	N/A	Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X		X	X				X			X		X	X	N/A	5
Flórez-Pinilla & Villacampa Estiarte (2023)	222	Left-wing	Private institutional records, Surveys	Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Multivariate)		X	X				X				X				-Type and severity of crimes committed* -Living with a partner inside the group	6
Fraser-Rahim & Khalid (2021)	1	Religiously motivated	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X	X		X		X	X			X					N/A	5
Gallant (2014)	4	Right-wing	Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Interpretive design (Thematic analysis)	X*	X	X*	X	X*	X*		X*		X		X*		X	-Continued contacts with former members -Unresolved ideological beliefs -Lack of formal exit programs -Substance abuse issues	5
Gaudette et al. (2023)	10	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*	X	X	X*	X	X			X						-Revisiting extremist forums -Searching for extremist content online	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance														Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group		
Geary (2018)	10	Religiously motivated, Right-wing, Nationalist	Meetings with participants	N/A (N/A)	X	X	X*	X					X					-Social stigma -Lack of community acceptance -Lack of institutional support	6	
Gheorghe & Yuzva Clement (2025)	N/A	Male supremacy	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X			X	X					X			N/A	5	
Glowacki (2013)	9	Right-wing, Religiously motivated	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X		N/A	6	
Glowacz (2020)	3	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X							X			X			N/A	6	
Gómez et al. (2022)	23	Religiously motivated	Surveys	Cross-sectional (Bivariate)	X*		X								X			-Life-threatening scenarios -Pressure from government authorities	6	
Goodwin (2022)	6	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology (Grounded theorization)	X	X			X	X								N/A	6	
Gould (2021)	12	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)		X	X	X	X						X			-Lack of emotional support system after leaving	6	

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Goure (1968)	125	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Case study (Textual/content analysis)	X		X	X*	X										-Fear of mistreatment by government authorities -Surveillance and lack of opportunities under Viet Cong control -Family members held hostage by the Viet Cong -Delayed exit (waiting to contact family or government authorities) -Delayed exit to harvest crops -Fear of arrest or being killed by government forces during defection -Waiting for home leave or lunar new year holiday to defect -Fear of land confiscation by the Viet Cong	5
Hidayat et al. (2024)	N/A	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology (Thematic analysis)						X				X					N/A	3
Hintz & Baker (2021)	77 posts	Male supremacy	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)		X			X										N/A	6
Horgan et al. (2017)	1	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)	X				X	X	X*								-Continued ties with group members -Feelings of guilt	4

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Hwang (2017)	N/A	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X		X	X						X	X		-Continued ties with former group members -Difficulty severing ties due to marriage, friendships, or family connections	4
Hwang et al. (2013)	23	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*	X	X*		X		X		X				X		-Conditional disengagement based on perceived threat to one's community	3
Jenaway & Windisch (2022)	87	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Grounded theory (Thematic analysis)	X*		X	X*								X*	X		-Fear of retaliation -Lack of immediate alternative options -Perceived futility of leaving	5
Jensen et al. (2023)	50	Right-wing	Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study (Textual/content analysis)	X				X				X	X					N/A	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance														Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group		
Jensen & Simi (2019)	300/50/42	Right-wing, Left-wing, Religiously motivated, Single-issue	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis, Descriptive, Bivariate)	X	X			X*			X	X*	X					-Membership in a close-knit extremist group involving friends, family, or romantic partners -History of non-ideological criminal activity -Poor educational attainment and/or unstable work history -Substance abuse issues -Certain exit barriers disproportionately present in specific ideological milieus	4
Jones (2011)	36	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)	X							X	X						-Fear of punishment from the group	6
Jørgensen (2022)	3	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X		X				X	X					-Experiences of discrimination -Marginalization -Denigration -Difficulty reintegrating society	6
Kassimeris (2011)	2	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X				X	X		X							N/A	4

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	
Kenney & Hwang (2021)	33	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Grounded theorization)	X*	X*	X*	X	X*	X*			X*					-Continued commitment to ideology, cause, or leaders -Temporary disengagement as a coping strategy rather than full exit	4
Khalil et al. (2019)	129	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X		X						X			X	X	-Threat of retaliation from the group -Inability to physically disengage despite ideological deradicalization -Loss of territorial control by Al-Shabaab -Lack of opportunities for safe disengagement	5
Kimmel (2007)	N/A	Right-wing	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X		X	X*								X		N/A	5
Kropiunigg (2013)	1	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis)	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X				-Cultural and societal pressures	6
Kruglanski et al. (2014)	1,906	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Surveys	Non-randomized control trial (Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate)	X					X	X	X	X		X		X	N/A	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Lafaye (2022)	64	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X							X							-Negative media attention -Difficulty rebuilding personal relationships -Difficulty securing housing -Difficulty finding employment -Stress related to public scrutiny -Strict probation conditions	6
Latif et al. (2018)	47	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X		X			X	X					X		-Emotional connections to their past group	6
Latif et al. (2020)	21	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X					X*	X				X		-Continued belief in the cause's legitimacy -Ongoing virtual contact with the movement -Continued social or criminal ties with former racist comrades -Sense of alienation from outsiders reinforcing nostalgia for supremacist group life	6
Leviton (2020)	12	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X							X	X						N/A	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Liem & Weggemans (2018)	3	N/A	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)			X		X		X								-Media scrutiny -Lack of formal support	4
Liguori (2021)	9	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X			X	X	X				X	X			N/A	6
Liguori & Spanierman (2022)	9	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Phenomenology (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X		X						X				N/A	6
Linden & Klandermans (2006)	36	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)									X						N/A	5
Liu et al. (2023)	300	Conspiracy	Surveys	Experimental (Descriptive, Multivariate)							X								N/A	6
Mattsson & Johansson (2018)	10	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*	X		X	X										N/A	5
Mattsson & Johansson (2019)	2	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X			X	X	X								-Continued ideological attachment post-exit -Inability to build a social life after exit	6
Menshawy (2021)	44	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X				X	X		X			X				N/A	5

					Factors associated with desistance															
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
Menshawy & Al-Anani (2021)	42	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Narrative research, Ethnography (Textual/content analysis)	X					X		X						X	-Challenges related to real kinship ties, particularly with spouses -Psychological crises following disengagement -Lack of a supportive social circle	5
Milla et al. (2020)	89	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Thematic analysis, Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate, Mediation Analysis, Moderation Analysis)	X	X	X			X*					X*				-Adoption of alternative identities*	6
Mitts (2022)	15,140,867 tweets	Religiously motivated	Online big data	Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Bivariate)															N/A	6
Moeller (2022)	45	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis, In-depth hermeneutics, Research vignettes)	X*	X*	X*	X			X								-Continued interaction with extremist individuals -Unresolved psychological or legal issues -Restrictive measures perceived as unjustified -Social isolation following disengagement -Pressure from extremist groups preventing exit	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Moeller et al. (2022)	3	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Psychoanalytically informed interpretation)	X	X					X								-Intolerance of ambiguity in the post-exit world	5
Mohamed Ali et al. (2017)	3	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*											X			N/A	6
Mohr (2010)	6	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X													N/A	5
Mubaraq et al. (2022)	N/A	Religiously motivated	Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)							X				X				-Threats from former extremist associates -Slower pace of deradicalization compared to recruitment	5
Muhanna-Matar (2017)	28	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		-State repression through severe anti-terror policies -Challenge to ideological legitimacy and public recognition	5
Muluk et al. (2020)	66	Religiously motivated	Private institutional records	Observational/correlational (Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate)						X					X				N/A	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	
Munden (2023a)	16	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)														-Cognitive distortions redirecting negative emotions toward outgroups and reinforcing self-importance, purpose, and ideological conviction -Strong ideological and emotional assumptions	6
Munden (2023b)	10	Right-wing	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)					X									-Attachment to group-related identity and feeling lost post-exit	6
Neumann (2015)	58	N/A	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X													-Lack of resources -Fear of consequences from the group -Threats to deserters and their families from group members -Rejection and isolation during community reintegration	5
Nilsson (2022)	3	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Unstructured)	X*					X								N/A	4

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Nivette et al. (2022)	910	N/A	Surveys	Longitudinal (Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate)		X*													N/A	6
Nussio (2012)	62	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Grounded theorization)									X						-Nostalgia for paramilitary life -Continued ties with former comrades -Economic hardship and unemployment -Social stigma and rejection -Availability of criminal groups providing easy re-entry points into violence	5
Nussio & Ugarriza (2021)	19,504	Left-wing	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study, Cohort/longitudinal (Textual/content analysis, Multivariate)	X*		X	X	X			X*	X						-Fear of getting killed by extremist group	6
Oppenheim et al. (2015)	582	Left-wing	Surveys	Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Multivariate)	X														N/A	6
Osuna (2024)	237 posts and 11,811 comments	Male supremacy	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X	X		X		X							X		-Fear of losing friendships within the group	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence		
Pal & Chaudhary (2023)	6	Nationalist/ Right-wing/ Religiously motivated	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X			X	X		X	X		X			X	N/A	5
Rahmanto & Golose (2022)	20	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case studies (Thematic analysis)	X												X	N/A	3
Rahmanto et al. (2020)	12	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Exploratory research design (Thematic analysis)	X*		X*	X		X*		X	X	X*			X	-Social isolation -Marginalization -Lack of employment or educational opportunities	4
Reinares (2011)	N/A	Nationalist/ Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			X		-Disengagement from a terrorist organization not accompanied by ideological deradicalization	4
Reiter et al. (2021)	12	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)		X				X			X		X		X	-Loneliness	6
Riley et al. (2017)	125	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Thematic analysis, Descriptive)								X*						N/A	5
<i>Riley & Schneider (2022)</i>	14	Nationalist	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X		X	X				X					X	-Lack of improvements in civilian life -Fear of reprisal	5

					Factors associated with desistance															
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
Saidin & Khalid (2023)	N/A	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X		X*						X		X*				N/A	4
Scrivens et al. (2022)	10	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)															N/A	6
Shajkovci (2015)	12	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records, Publicly available data	Ethnographic study (Textual/content analysis)	X	X	X	X								X			-Punishment for leaving the group -Passport seizures and forced detachment from families in countries of origin -Lack of viable life alternatives -Fear of imprisonment upon leaving -Continued stay fostering in-group solidarity	6

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Shajkovci et al. (2023)	10	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X	X	X				X						-Struggles between extremist and conventional identities -Preconceived notions of femininity within the group leading to confusion during interventions -Lack of transferable skills and experience compared to male defectors	3
Sieckelincx et al. (2019)	34	Right-wing, Left-wing, Religiously motivated, Animal-rights	Meetings with participants	Case study, Narrative research (Grounded theorization)	X	X					X								N/A	6
Sieckelincx & Winter (2015)	60	Religiously motivated, Right-wing, Left-wing, Animal-rights	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	-Lack of a strong sense of identity and self-esteem -Lack of power and belonging outside of group membership -Influence of radical family members	5

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group
Sikkens et al. (2017)	11	Right-wing, Religiously motivated, Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study (Grounded theorization)		X*	X		X*		X*								-Disrupted family climate -Lack of communication within the family -Lack of resources -Lack of professional help	5
Simi et al. (2017)	89	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis, Grounded theorization)	X				X							X	X		N/A	6
Simi et al. (2019)	40	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative (Thematic analysis)	X*	X	X*	X*	X			X*	X			X*	X		-Social isolation -Fear of retaliation -Lack of alternatives (e.g., employment, social networks) -Mental health struggles -Stigma and rejection from society -Residual extremist beliefs	6
Sirry (2020)	700	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Thematic analysis, Descriptive)	X*	X	X	X						X					N/A	4

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance												Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **		
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt			Deterrence	Lack of action by the group
Souleimanov & Aliyev (2020)	96	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Publicly available data	Case study (Thematic analysis, Textual/content analysis)		X*	X*						X*		X*			X*	-High levels of ideological indoctrination	5
Speckhard & Ellenberg (2020)	220	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X						X	X							-Fear of arrest when returning home as a foreign fighter	4
Speckhard & Yayla (2015)	13	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X														-Fear of being killed by the group if caught fleeing	6
Stern et al. (2023)	17	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X						X								-Employer reluctance to hire individuals with a criminal or extremist past -Mismatch between available jobs and individual skill set -Addiction to hate -Mental illness	5
Suyanto et al. (2022)	700	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Surveys	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X													-Persistent encouragement from a mentor to return to the group	5

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance														Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **	
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group			
Syafiq (2019)	7	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*	X*	X*							X*						-Criticism and pressure from former comrades -Challenges in forming new identities -Fear of being labelled as weak or a traitor -Stigmatization and societal exclusion	5
Taylor et al. (2019)	32	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Private institutional records	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X*									X		X				-Death threats from the group -Struggles to reintegrate due to security threats and stigmatization within society -Fear for personal safety when attempting to establish new livelihoods outside reintegration centers	5
Thorburn (2023)	160 Reddit posts	Male supremacy	Publicly available data	Ethnographic study (Thematic analysis)	X	X		X												N/A	6

					Factors associated with desistance														Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group		
<i>United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] (2023)</i>	2,196	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants, Surveys	Narrative research, Cross-sectional (Thematic analysis, Descriptive)	X*	X	X		X*			X	X	X					-Unchanged beliefs in people who were forced to leave the group (e.g., after being caught)	6
van de Wetering et al. (2018)	6	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research, Case study (Grounded theorization)	X	X	X	X	X		X	X			X		X		N/A	4
van der Heide & Huurman (2016)	27	Religiously motivated	Publicly available data	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X*		X	X*											N/A	6
van der Valk & Wagenaar (2010)	12	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X				X	-Positive reinforcement and excitement associated with violent acts -Threats from others and fear of reprisal post-exit -Group perceived as a source of protection -Postponement of exit due to safety concerns -Lack of social connections outside the movement	5
Vidino (2011)	2	Religiously motivated	Private institutional records	Case study, Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X					X							X*		N/A	6

					Factors associated with desistance															
Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence	Lack of action by the group	Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **
Webber et al. (2018)	601/179	Nationalist	Meetings with participants, Surveys	Cohort/longitudinal, Cross-sectional (Descriptive, Bivariate, Multivariate)		X	X			X*			X*		X*				-Continued ties with fellow members -Continued ties to diaspora supporters advocating for separatist violence	6
Windisch et al. (2019)	28	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Textual/content analysis)	X			X				X						X	N/A	6
Windisch et al. (2022)	47	Right-wing	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Grounded theorization)	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X		X			-Difficulty detaching from extremist identity, lifestyle, and ideology -Continued emotional, financial, and thrill-seeking attachments -Overwhelming feelings of guilt and betrayal	6
Winter & Muhanna-Matar (2020)	6	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Narrative research (Thematic analysis)	X	X													N/A	4

Study	Sample size	Type of extremist ideology	Data sources	Study designs (analyses)	Factors associated with desistance													Obstacles to reintegration	Risk-of-bias score (/6) **		
					Disillusionment	Peer group/support	Family influence	Mental distress/stress	Life-changing event	Education/counter-narratives	Judicialization	Internal group conflicts	Employment	Religion	Participation in a program	Guilt	Deterrence			Lack of action by the group	
Yilmaz (2012)	13	Left-wing	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)			X	X						X						-Internal struggles -Social reintegration challenges -Social stigma and ostracization -Employment difficulties -Technological and social changes -Community backlash -Distrust of government and policies	6
Zahari et al. (2024)	12	Religiously motivated	Meetings with participants	Case study (Thematic analysis)		X	X	X						X						-Stigma and societal rejection -Lack of employment opportunities -Government distrust and political dissatisfaction -Continued contact with former extremist networks -Mental health struggles and emotional distress	6

Note. * Important factor (turning point). ** For the risk-of-bias score, higher scores indicate greater methodological transparency and a lower risk of bias. Quantitative studies are presented in bold. Mixed-method studies are presented in bold italics.

The distribution of desistance factors highlighted several recurring themes (see Table 4). Disillusionment was by far the most frequently identified factor (73.2%), followed by peer group/support (49.7%) and family influence (46.3%). Other commonly identified factors included mental distress/stress (38.3%), life-changing event (33.6%), education/counter-narratives (32.9%), judicialization (31.5%), and internal group conflicts (30.2%). Less commonly cited were employment (27.5%), religion (24.8%), participation in a disengagement or deradicalization program (20.8%), guilt (19.5%), deterrence (17.4%), and lack of action by the group (12.8%).

Table 4
Study Count of Desistance Factors and Turning Points

Desistance Factors	Occurrences in Studies (<i>k</i> / %)		Identified as a Turning Point (<i>k</i> / %)		Proportion of Occurrences Identified as Turning Points (%)
Disillusionment	109	73.2%	25	16.8%	22.9%
Peer group/support	74	49.7%	10	6.7%	13.5%
Family influence	69	46.3%	13	8.7%	18.8%
Mental distress/stress	57	38.3%	10	6.7%	17.5%
Life-changing event	50	33.6%	7	4.7%	14.0%
Education/counter-narratives	49	32.9%	8	5.4%	16.3%
Judicialization	47	31.5%	6	4.0%	12.8%
Internal group conflicts	45	30.2%	8	5.4%	17.8%
Employment	41	27.5%	6	4.0%	14.6%
Religion	37	24.8%	5	3.4%	13.5%
Participation in a program	31	20.8%	5	3.4%	16.1%
Guilt	29	19.5%	4	2.7%	13.8%
Deterrence	26	17.4%	4	2.7%	15.4%
Lack of action by the group	19	12.8%	1	0.7%	5.3%

In addition to documenting how often each factor appeared across studies, Table 4 captures the extent to which these factors were explicitly identified by authors as turning points. Disillusionment again stands out: although present in 109 studies, it was labeled a turning point in 25 of them (22.9% of its occurrences). Family influence also showed a relatively high turning-point proportion (18.8%), followed closely by internal group conflicts (17.8%), mental distress/stress (17.5%), education/counter-narratives (16.3%), participation in a program (16.1%), and deterrence (15.4%). These were followed by employment (14.6%), life-changing event (14.0%), guilt (13.8%), peer support (13.5%), religion (13.5%), and

judicialization (12.8%). Lack of action by the group (5.3%) was rarely described as a pivotal moment of change. Although these proportions are not effect sizes and should not be interpreted as such, they nonetheless provide qualitative indications of which factors tend to exert greater influence in supporting desistance from violent extremism and social reintegration.

Thematic Analyses of Factors in Trajectories Out of Violent Extremism

The AI-assisted thematic analyses synthesized how the literature describes factors associated with successful desistance and obstacles encountered, identifying overarching themes that emerged across studies. These themes are described in the text below. Factors associated with desistance are presented in descending order of frequency across studies. It is important to note that these themes are not mutually exclusive and are expected to intertwine in practice.

Factors Associated With Desistance From Violent Extremism

Disillusionment With the Ideology or Group. A key finding is that disillusionment functions as a central psychological state that both reflects and binds together many other desistance factors. Although treated as a distinct factor in this review, disillusionment frequently emerges as the cumulative outcome of diverse influences such as guilt, family pressures, religious reinterpretations, or leadership failures, which gradually erode confidence in the group. These influences converge into a sense of disillusionment that often acts as a turning point in the desistance trajectory. While such pathways are complex and nonlinear, disillusionment stands out as a common mechanism through which multiple factors exert their impact.

Disillusionment often takes root when individuals perceive contradictions between a group's stated values and its actual practices. Encounters with civilian harm, internal hypocrisy, or leadership failings are frequently described as catalysts for cognitive dissonance and moral injury (Altier et al., 2017; Bont, 2021; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). Within religiously framed organizations, inconsistencies between sacred texts and organizational behavior can prompt ideological distancing (Sirry, 2020; Winter &

Muhanna-Matar, 2020). Exposure to alternative narratives through literature, discussions with outsiders, or critical dialogue further destabilizes extremist beliefs and encourages reflective questioning (Christensen, 2019; Liguori, 2021; Nilsson, 2022; Sieckelinck et al., 2019). In white supremacist and manosphere contexts, recognition of logical inconsistencies or scientific flaws similarly fosters cognitive rupture and eventual desistance (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Gheorghe & Yuzva Clement, 2025).

Strategic frustrations also play a substantial role. Disappointment with ineffective violence, tactical stagnation, or stalled political progress can accelerate desistance (Clubb, 2014; Hwang, 2017; Kenney & Hwang, 2021; Menshawy & Al-Anani, 2021; Reinares, 2011). Dysfunctional group dynamics such as authoritarian leadership, internal disputes, or pervasive hypocrisy further erode commitment (Hwang et al., 2013; Menshawy & Al-Anani, 2021; Windisch et al., 2019). Women, in particular, frequently report gender-based marginalization within groups that claim moral or ideological purity; such experiences often become a decisive source of disillusionment (Latif et al., 2020; Shajkovci et al., 2023). Many individuals also enter with idealistic expectations but instead encounter poor living conditions, abusive or chaotic organizational environments, and unfulfilled promises, all of which deepen the sense of disappointment (Baudon, 2017; Gómez et al., 2022; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; UNDP, 2023).

Emotional exhaustion, often expressed as simply being “sick of the violence,” is another recurring pathway into disillusionment (Carroll II, 2022; Liguori, 2021; Leviton, 2020). Identity conflicts also feature prominently, including among women and LGBTQ+ members whose personal values increasingly clash with rigid group norms (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Pal & Chaudhary, 2023). Overall, disillusionment tends to unfold gradually through an accumulation of doubts, frustrations, and unmet expectations, creating space for critical reflection and openness to alternatives. When complemented by educational, psychological, or relational support, this process can culminate in identity reconstruction and facilitate desistance from violent extremism (da Silva et al., 2019; DeMichele et al., 2021; Fraser-Rahim & Khalid, 2021).

Peer Group/Support. Peer relationships played a critical role in both sustaining and disrupting extremist involvement. Meaningful contact with individuals outside the group often challenges ideological rigidity by introducing lived experiences that contradict extremist

narratives. Fisher-Smith et al. (2020) distinguish between two types of relationships central to this process: (1) transgressive relationships, which involve social interactions that violate extremist norms (e.g., forming friendships with members of stigmatized groups) and thereby destabilize stereotypes and generate cognitive dissonance; and (2) transitional relationships, which support identity reconstruction beyond extremism by offering new sources of belonging and emotional support. Friendships, mentorships, and romantic relationships within this second category frequently serve as bridges between extremist and nonextremist identities. Aho (1988) and Carroll II (2022) similarly show how sustained engagement with previously demonized groups contributes to ideological softening and reflective questioning. Romantic relationships, in particular, can catalyze desistance by introducing new emotional attachments and priorities (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Elofson, 2017).

Leaving extremist peer circles and developing more inclusive networks further strengthens disengagement by replacing radical ties with positive alternatives. Friendships grounded in trust, empathy, and shared values help individuals rebuild their sense of self (Gheorghe & Yuzva Clement, 2025; Gould, 2021). Family and community support can also reduce stigma and facilitate reintegration (Ahmad, 2016; Shajkovci et al., 2023). At the same time, extremist peer-related disappointments often act as powerful triggers of disillusionment. Experiences of betrayal, rivalry, or the realization that fellow members are driven by self-interest rather than ideological commitment frequently erode loyalty (Kenney & Hwang, 2021; Windisch et al., 2019). Some individuals desist after being threatened, marginalized, or abandoned by their peers (van de Wetering et al., 2018; Winter & Muhanna-Matar, 2020). This dynamic is evident online as well, where individuals report withdrawing from extremist spaces after trusted peers become increasingly hostile, irrational, or conspiratorial (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Thorburn, 2023). Alternatively, observing respected peers express doubt or exit can normalize disengagement and create cognitive openings for reconsideration (Horgan et al., 2017; Nivette et al., 2022).

Family Influence. Family relationships often serve as crucial sources of emotional support that encourage individuals to leave extremist groups. Strong emotional bonds and practical assistance from family members counteract the isolation cultivated within extremist environments, offering alternative frameworks of care and belonging (van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; Shajkovci et al., 2023). Feelings of guilt, concern for a parent's well-being,

or fear of losing contact with children frequently motivate individuals to reassess their priorities and distance themselves from extremism (Bérubé et al., 2019; Cherney, 2018). Families can also function as moral anchors. When their values contradict extremist ideology, explicit rejection of violence or hatred highlights the emotional toll extremism imposes on loved ones and can prompt individuals to exit (Chalmers, 2017; Ferguson et al., 2015; Gómez et al., 2022; Pal & Chaudhary, 2023).

Beyond emotional influence, family responsibilities such as parenthood and marriage often catalyze disengagement. The desire to raise children in safer, more nurturing environments motivates many to abandon extremist commitments (Durie-Smith & Ismail, 2024; Latif et al., 2020; Riley & Schneider, 2022; Windisch et al., 2019). Marriage can similarly facilitate desistance as individuals reorient their identities toward care, stability, and responsibility (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). After leaving extremist groups, family acceptance plays a vital role in psychological recovery and reintegration. Individuals with strong family support systems tend to demonstrate greater resilience and a reduced risk of relapse during the vulnerable post-exit period (Carroll II, 2022; Gaudette et al., 2023; Glowacz, 2020; Gould, 2021; Kenney & Hwang, 2021).

However, family influence is not uniformly supportive of desistance. In some contexts, family networks reinforce extremist commitment, particularly when entire families are embedded within radical milieus. In tightly knit or transgenerational movements, close kinship bonds can intensify loyalty pressures, making disengagement significantly more difficult (Hwang et al., 2013).

Mental Distress/Stress. Exposure to violence, trauma, and coercive group environments often produces psychological injuries that gradually erode ideological commitment. Former participants frequently describe moral injury (psychological distress caused by acting in ways that betray one's own moral compass), alongside emotional exhaustion and guilt, all of which accumulate over time and create sustained pressure to leave. Research highlights the profound impact of trauma stemming from combat, abuse, or witnessing atrocities, with such experiences often serving as catalysts for disengagement (Bont, 2021; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016). Emotional burnout also emerges from prolonged exposure to toxic group dynamics or activism disconnected from tangible outcomes. Many describe a steady buildup of fatigue, conflict, hypervigilance, and emotional

overload, often intensified by internal infighting or coercive control, which gradually depletes psychological resilience and makes continued involvement feel unsustainable (Fraser-Rahim & Khalid, 2021; Kenney & Hwang, 2021; Windisch et al., 2019). Feelings of guilt and remorse over past violence further motivate individuals to seek change and withdraw from extremist circles (Bérubé et al., 2019; Bubolz & Simi, 2015).

Women and gender-diverse individuals report distinctive psychological pressures, including gender-based violence, isolation, and loss of autonomy, which exacerbate distress and contribute to disengagement (Latif et al., 2020; Pal & Chaudhary, 2023; van de Wetering et al., 2018). Identity conflicts intensified by contact with out-group members often provoke existential questioning and deepen psychological strain (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Christensen, 2019; Thorburn, 2023). In these contexts, therapeutic interventions that provide emotional validation, coping strategies, and structured support play an important role in enabling recovery and facilitating desistance (Muluk et al., 2020).

Life-Changing Event. Life-changing events reshape values and priorities, frequently acting as turning points that prompt individuals to leave extremist groups. These events are often transversal, intersecting with and amplifying other desistance factors. For instance, the birth of a child directly connects to family responsibilities, while the death of a group member can intensify mental distress or deepen disillusionment. Parenthood is one of the most frequently cited examples. Windisch et al. (2019) and Latif et al. (2020) describe cases in which individuals left extremist movements after recognizing the incompatibility between their ideological commitments and their responsibilities toward their children. Gaudette et al. (2023) similarly note that concerns about exposing children to hatred, violence, or instability often prompt individuals to reassess their involvement and prioritize a safer, more nurturing environment for their families.

Other transformative life events, including personal loss or the formation of new relationships, also commonly initiate or reinforce desistance processes. Reinares (2011) and van der Heide and Huurman (2016) document how the deaths of friends, relatives, or fellow members—whether in combat, through suicide, or as a result of state repression—can disrupt ideological narratives of heroism and invincibility. Such losses often introduce emotional vulnerability and force individuals to reconsider the meaning and costs of their involvement.

Kassimeris (2011) and Vidino (2011) similarly report that traumatic events can give rise to emotional reflection and a gradual distancing from extremist commitments.

As noted in the previous section, romantic relationships also play a key role in disengagement and cognitive reframing. Carroll II (2022) describes cases in which participants began questioning their beliefs after forming intimate partnerships. Liguori (2021) and Mattsson and Johansson (2018) demonstrate how romantic ties with individuals outside the group can trigger cognitive dissonance, challenge extremist views, and gradually replace group influence with more supportive and humanizing forms of belonging.

Education/Counter-Narratives. Educational experiences play an important role in desistance by fostering critical thinking, cognitive openness, and emotional reflection. Carroll II (2022) notes that exposure to subjects such as history, ethics, or political science enabled participants to move beyond binary thinking and adopt more nuanced understandings of society. Such intellectual shifts weaken ideological rigidity and support identity transformation. Similarly, Hwang (2017) and Menshawy and Al-Anani (2021) document how engagement with new ideas, through independent reading, formal education, or open discussion in academic settings, encourages individuals to question and ultimately reject extremist worldviews. For these cognitive changes to take hold, however, participants must be in a psychological state that allows them to absorb and reflect on alternative perspectives.

Individualized counter-narrative work provides another important tool for disrupting extremist belief systems (not to be confused with counter-narrative campaigns). These messages challenge core ideological claims by reframing them through credible sources or emotionally resonant storytelling. Muluk et al. (2020) describe deradicalization programs in Indonesia where respected religious scholars offered alternative interpretations of sacred texts, softening jihadist convictions. Botto and Gottzén (2024) highlight the potential of online content that humanizes stigmatized groups, especially when it contradicts stereotypes previously held by extremists. Duriesmith and Ismail (2024) and Liguori (2021) likewise show that counter-narratives introduced through interpersonal dialogue or personal relationships can foster empathy and undermine extremist commitments. The perceived credibility of the messenger is central to the effectiveness of these approaches.

Structured learning programs complement counter-narratives by providing participants with practical and intellectual tools for reflection, reintegration, and future planning. Chandra

(2017) and Curiel et al. (2023) highlight the benefits of vocational training, civic education, and religious instruction in supporting constructive change. Cherney (2018) and Ferguson (2016) further demonstrate that such initiatives, whether delivered in prison or community contexts, are most effective when they address not only ideological needs but also emotional and structural barriers. A recurring theme across these interventions is the cultivation of empathy. Horgan et al. (2017) describe participants who began questioning their involvement after encountering personal stories of suffering caused by their group's actions. These emotional reactions, particularly when they resonate with pre-existing doubts, can serve as openings for deeper ideological transformation.

Judicialization. This factor refers to the impact of legal and penal processes (particularly incarceration) on disengagement from extremist groups. Imprisonment imposes physical and social distance from extremist networks, creating space for self-reflection and ideological reassessment (geographic relocation can similarly facilitate passive disengagement; Clubb, 2014). Studies show that prison environments can compel individuals to confront the consequences of their actions and reconsider the legitimacy of their groups (Altier et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2021; Glowacki, 2013; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016). For many, incarceration represents a turning point in their trajectory, prompting them to question both the morality and the effectiveness of violence as a political tool (Ashour, 2007; Ferguson et al., 2015; Reinares, 2011). Courtroom proceedings and the public nature of legal sanctions can further operate as “moral mirrors,” fostering reflection on past behaviors.

Judicial processes also reshape social networks by severing extremist ties and facilitating new, more diverse connections, thereby weakening radical commitments and instilling doubt (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Christensen, 2019; Glowacz, 2020; Horgan et al., 2017; Moeller et al., 2022). The emotional shock of arrest and imprisonment frequently opens psychological space for identity reassessment and value shifts. Incarceration may also provide access to rehabilitation programs (education, psychological support, vocational training, etc.) that help individuals adopt nonextremist perspectives (Cherney, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2015; Muluk et al., 2020).

The post-release phase, however, remains critical. Without comprehensive reintegration measures such as housing, employment, counselling, and community support,

individuals face heightened risks of isolation and potential re-radicalization (Altier et al., 2017; Carroll II, 2022; Windisch et al., 2019).

Internal Group Conflicts. Internal conflicts within extremist groups, including leadership betrayal, ideological disputes, and toxic social dynamics, constitute another significant driver of desistance. Members often become disillusioned when leaders act hypocritically, exploit resources, or withdraw from organizational commitments (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2013; Windisch et al., 2019). Ideological disagreements over strategy or long-term objectives can also trigger large-scale defections, particularly in groups where debates about violence versus political engagement create deep divisions (Clubb, 2014; Menshaw & Al-Anani, 2021; Reinares, 2011).

Beyond such disputes, toxic internal environments characterized by surveillance, coercive loyalty testing, and constant competition foster fear, instability, and alienation (while fueling mental distress). Women are often disproportionately affected, facing scapegoating, isolation, or gender-based violence within these dynamics (Lafaye, 2022; Latif et al., 2020). Interpersonal betrayals and the breakdown of close relationships inside the group further contribute to emotional exhaustion and the erosion of social bonds that underpin extremist identity (Latif et al., 2020; Reinares, 2011; Windisch et al., 2022). As these fractures deepen, members frequently lose the social cohesion that once reinforced the ideology, creating conditions that make desistance more likely.

Employment. This factor plays a vital role in the desistance process by providing structure, purpose, and alternative forms of identity that contrast with extremist commitments. Gaudette et al. (2023) and Horgan et al. (2017) show that re-engagement with education or career development helps individuals fill the void left after leaving extremist groups, enabling them to develop new sources of direction and belonging. Carroll II (2022) and Windisch et al. (2019) similarly demonstrate that stable employment contributes to the rebuilding of daily routines, self-worth, and personal legitimacy. These positive changes promote social inclusion and encourage individuals to redefine their identities around socially valued roles rather than past affiliations with extremism.

Professional development support within disengagement programs further strengthens long-term reintegration. Initiatives that include vocational training, job placement, or formal education help participants gain economic independence and reduce the risk of recidivism.

Cherney (2018) and Jones (2011) document the effectiveness of employment-focused interventions in enabling former extremists to provide for their families and sustain disengagement over time. Chandra (2017) adds that social entrepreneurship approaches equip individuals with practical skills, expand their social networks, and model prosocial behavior. Such interventions not only build confidence but also help counteract the stigma associated with an extremist past.

Economic disappointment can itself become a driver of desistance. The UNDP (2023) notes that unmet promises of financial gain or material stability within extremist groups often contribute to disillusionment and eventual exit. However, securing employment after disengagement remains challenging. Many individuals face structural barriers such as criminal records, limited education, and persistent stigma. Windisch et al. (2019) warn that unemployment or underemployment can increase the risk of relapse, particularly when economic desperation narrows available options.

Religion. Faith plays a complex and often constructive role in the desistance process. Rather than abandoning their religion, individuals frequently move toward processes of reinterpretation. Chalmers (2017) and Cherney (2018) describe how exposure to alternative teachings, including comparative religion courses and prison-based religious education, enabled participants to shift toward more peaceful, spiritual, or moderate expressions of faith. This form of faith reconstruction allows individuals to preserve a sense of spiritual identity while rejecting extremist interpretations of sacred texts. Menshawy (2021) similarly documents how former members of the Muslim Brotherhood deliberately separated their religious commitments from political ideology, reflecting a broader pattern in which individuals maintain religiosity while distancing themselves from militant beliefs. Such re-readings of faith provide an internal mechanism to discredit violent narratives, increasing their legitimacy and resonance for those in transition.

Religion can also function as a source of emotional healing, moral guidance, and community reintegration following desistance. Practices rooted in nonmilitant forms of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam have helped individuals process guilt, reestablish social bonds, and pursue personal growth (Hidayat et al., 2024; Windisch et al., 2022). Carroll II (2022) likewise observes that prayer, meditation, and participation in religious services

provided emotional relief and stability, helping to replace extremist identities with more positive spiritual self-concepts.

The effectiveness of religious interventions, however, depends greatly on their design and implementation. Programs must incorporate theological literacy and be guided by credible religious figures who can challenge extremist interpretations without dismissing broader traditions of faith. Muluk et al. (2020) highlights the success of respected scholars in presenting alternative readings that decouple religious belief from militancy. By contrast, interventions that lack religious sensitivity or appear to attack faith directly may prove counterproductive, especially when extremist groups portray themselves as the sole authentic expression of religion.

Participation in a Disengagement or Deradicalization Program. Participation in formal disengagement and deradicalization programs plays a crucial role in supporting individuals as they exit extremist groups. The literature describes holistic and individualized initiatives that address ideological, emotional, and practical needs. Studies from Pakistan report approaches combining vocational training, psychological counseling, education, and family involvement to facilitate participants' transition away from extremism (Azam & Fatima, 2017). Research from Australia similarly describes multidisciplinary interventions integrating risk assessment, therapy, and reintegration planning (Cherney, 2018). In Indonesia, prison-based interventions promote ideological changes through religious dialogue and self-awareness practices, often embedded within trauma recovery frameworks (Muluk et al., 2020). German exit-focused services likewise emphasize identity transformation by guiding participants through structured self-reflection and offering practical tools for building alternative futures.

A central feature of many successful programs is the cultivation of trust-based relationships. Respectful and nonjudgmental dialogue creates the conditions for participants to reflect on their actions and critically examine their beliefs. Christensen (2019) shows that such interactions foster emotional honesty and self-awareness. Carroll II (2022) and Gould (2021) further underscore the role of social workers, mentors, and peer supporters in facilitating identity reconstruction and personal growth. Mentoring by individuals with lived experience in extremist groups often enhances program credibility, reduces stigma, and encourages meaningful connection. Engagement in prosocial activities, such as arts, sports,

activism, or community service, provides participants with renewed purpose and belonging (Glowacz, 2020; Liguori, 2021). Access to education and employment opportunities is equally important, as these facilitate long-term disengagement by offering hope, structure, and material stability (Windisch et al., 2019).

Desistance through formal programs is rarely immediate or linear. Long-term follow-up is essential, as many individuals continue to face psychological challenges and social stigma after leaving extremist groups. Gould (2021) emphasizes that programs must remain adaptive and sustained over time in order to support reintegration and reduce the risk of relapse.

Guilt. Remorse often emerges as a central emotional driver in the desistance process, particularly as individuals begin to recognize the harm caused by their involvement in extremist activities. DeMichele et al. (2021) and Bubolz and Simi (2015) describe how participation in violence or the dissemination of hate can generate deep guilt and emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Bérubé et al. (2019) and van der Heide and Huurman (2016) report that individuals who directly engaged in or facilitated violent acts frequently experience intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and emotional distress once separated from the group context. In some cases, encounters with victims or moments of moral clarity prompt recognition of harm and motivate desistance (Duriesmith & Ismail, 2024).

This sense of guilt often intersects with broader disillusionment, generating internal conflict and identity crises. Elofson (2017) and Hwang (2017) illustrate how former members begin to question the ideological foundations of their past actions, while Windisch et al. (2019) document how some white supremacists developed feelings of guilt only years after leaving, often triggered by parenthood or increased emotional maturity. Such delayed realizations can manifest as psychological or spiritual distress, further motivating individuals to seek change and reevaluate their self-concept (Mohamed Ali et al., 2017; Reinares, 2011).

Yet guilt does not only act as a destabilizing force; it can also inspire reparative action. Bérubé et al. (2019) and Horgan et al. (2017) note that former extremists often attempt to make amends by engaging in prevention work, mentoring youth, or supporting victims of extremist groups. Carroll II (2022) highlights that feelings of guilt toward close relations (e.g., children or parents harmed or neglected by one's extremist involvement) can be a strong catalyst for desistance and lay the groundwork for taking responsibility after exit. These

actions contribute to moral realignment and support the construction of new identities opposed to previous extremist commitments.

If left unaddressed, however, guilt may become psychologically burdensome and hinder long-term desistance. Simi et al. (2017) caution that unresolved guilt can foster shame, emotional instability, and a heightened risk of relapse. De Graaf & Weggemans (2016) further notes that trauma linked to extremist affiliation may intensify avoidance behaviors, moral injury, and cognitive dissonance, while persistent peer ties and the need for recognition can complicate recovery. Effective tertiary PVE efforts must therefore balance accountability with compassion, recognizing guilt as a necessary step toward healing rather than an impediment to it. Therapeutic interventions, including emotional expression workshops, operationalize this principle by helping individuals process guilt in constructive ways (Muluk et al., 2020).

Deterrence. This factor refers to external pressures such as threats to personal safety, legal consequences, and surveillance that discourage continued participation in extremist groups. While it does not necessarily produce immediate ideological change, deterrence often prompts behavioral withdrawal and can create openings for voluntary disengagement.

Concerns for personal safety and legal repercussions frequently exert a strong influence on decisions to desist, especially when combined with internal fractures within extremist groups. Fears related to physical harm, deteriorating health, or threats from within extremist circles often push individuals to reconsider their involvement (Baudon, 2017; DeMichele et al., 2021; van de Wetering et al., 2018). Fear has been identified as a particularly powerful motivator; for instance, many former Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) militants described exiting primarily out of concern for their personal security (Reinares, 2011).

Legal pressures such as prosecution, imprisonment, and restrictive monitoring similarly deter ongoing participation. Witnessing the arrest of peers or facing judicial sanctions often prompts individuals to step back, even when ideological convictions remain intact (Cherney, 2018; Duriesmith & Ismail, 2024; Ferguson et al., 2015). Surveillance and public exposure add another layer of deterrence, with targeted individuals reducing or halting their activism to avoid detection (Bérubé et al., 2019; Bonino, 2020). Although deterrence typically produces surface-level compliance rather than deep ideological transformation, it

can create opportunities for voluntary desistance when paired with supportive interventions such as mentoring, counseling, or reintegration support.

Lack of Action by the Group. Closely connected to disillusionment, the absence of meaningful action or effective leadership within extremist groups often contributes to member disengagement. When organizations fail to deliver on their promises or demonstrate tangible progress, frustration and withdrawal become common outcomes. Research shows that members grow discouraged when leadership is inconsistent or passive, particularly in contexts where slow organizational changes or vague strategies stall momentum (Ferguson et al., 2015; Menshawy & Al-Anani, 2021; Pal & Chaudhary, 2023). Frustrations are often linked to actions perceived as merely symbolic: leaders making bold announcements with no follow-through, organizing superficial events to “show strength,” or repeatedly promising operations that never materialize. Members come to see these gestures as empty rhetoric that impedes the group’s real progress. Kenney and Hwang (2021) and Rahmanto and Golose (2022) both highlight how this perceived gap between rhetoric and action deepens feelings of futility and accelerates disengagement. Neglect of members’ personal needs or crises further signals organizational dysfunction and undermines loyalty (Windisch et al., 2019).

In contrast to abrupt departures, desistance linked to a lack of group action tends to unfold gradually, as individuals drift away during periods of inactivity or stagnation, when collective enthusiasm dissipates (Pal & Chaudhary, 2023). In this sense, strategic inaction functions as a subtle but effective catalyst for desistance.

Obstacles to Reintegration (or Factors Associated With Relapse)

As with criminal careers, desistance from extremist lifestyles is not always permanent, and relapses can occur for a variety of reasons. One of the most prominent is identity disruption. Exiting a movement often entails the loss of a clear and purposeful sense of self, leaving individuals in a state of existential uncertainty. Bérubé et al. (2019) and Carroll II (2022) describe cases in which people re-entered extremist spaces not because of renewed ideological conviction but in search of recognition, belonging, and value. Christensen (2019) and Windisch et al. (2022) further emphasize that identity confusion after exit is frequently compounded by societal rejection and limited opportunities to express a reformed self. In the

absence of alternative frameworks for meaning and belonging, former members may feel drawn back toward the familiarity of extremist environments.

Social isolation is another critical factor shaping vulnerability to relapse. Windisch et al. (2019) found that individuals who lacked supportive friends, family, or community networks were more susceptible to return due to loneliness and disconnection. Brown et al. (2021) note that exit often entails the loss of community and emotional support, a situation intensified by stigma and exclusion from mainstream society. Under such conditions, extremist circles may remain the only accessible or accepting social environment.

Psychological vulnerabilities also heighten the risk of relapse. Van der Heide and Huurman (2016) highlight how untreated mental health conditions can drive individuals back toward the cognitive certainty and emotional structure offered by extremist ideologies. Bubolz and Simi (2015) and Munden (2023a) identify harmful cognitive patterns (including redirected anger, internalized victimhood, and black-and-white thinking) that can sustain or reactivate extremist worldviews. Gould (2021) and Liguori (2021) point to the addictive quality of extremist lifestyles, where the intensity, adrenaline, and sense of purpose associated with group involvement make civilian life feel dull or inadequate, increasing the pull toward relapse.

Practical and structural barriers further complicate sustained desistance. Clubb (2014) shows how the absence of stability, opportunity, or future prospects in civilian life can push individuals back toward former networks. Employment discrimination, housing insecurity, and legal restrictions can severely undermine reintegration efforts (Dwyer, 2013; Liem & Weggemans, 2018; Stern et al., 2023). When not addressed through targeted support services, these material hardships increase the likelihood of relapse.

Continued exposure to extremist networks or content adds another layer of difficulty. Latif et al. (2020) and Hwang (2017) observe that family ties, shared communities, and digital environments can maintain ideological links and peer influence long after exit. Botto and Gottzén (2024) note that online relapse frequently begins passively, through exposure to extremist material during moments of stress, vulnerability, or boredom, and can gradually intensify into active re-engagement.

Finally, incomplete or uninternalized desistance heightens the likelihood of relapse. When exit occurs primarily in response to external pressures rather than internal conviction,

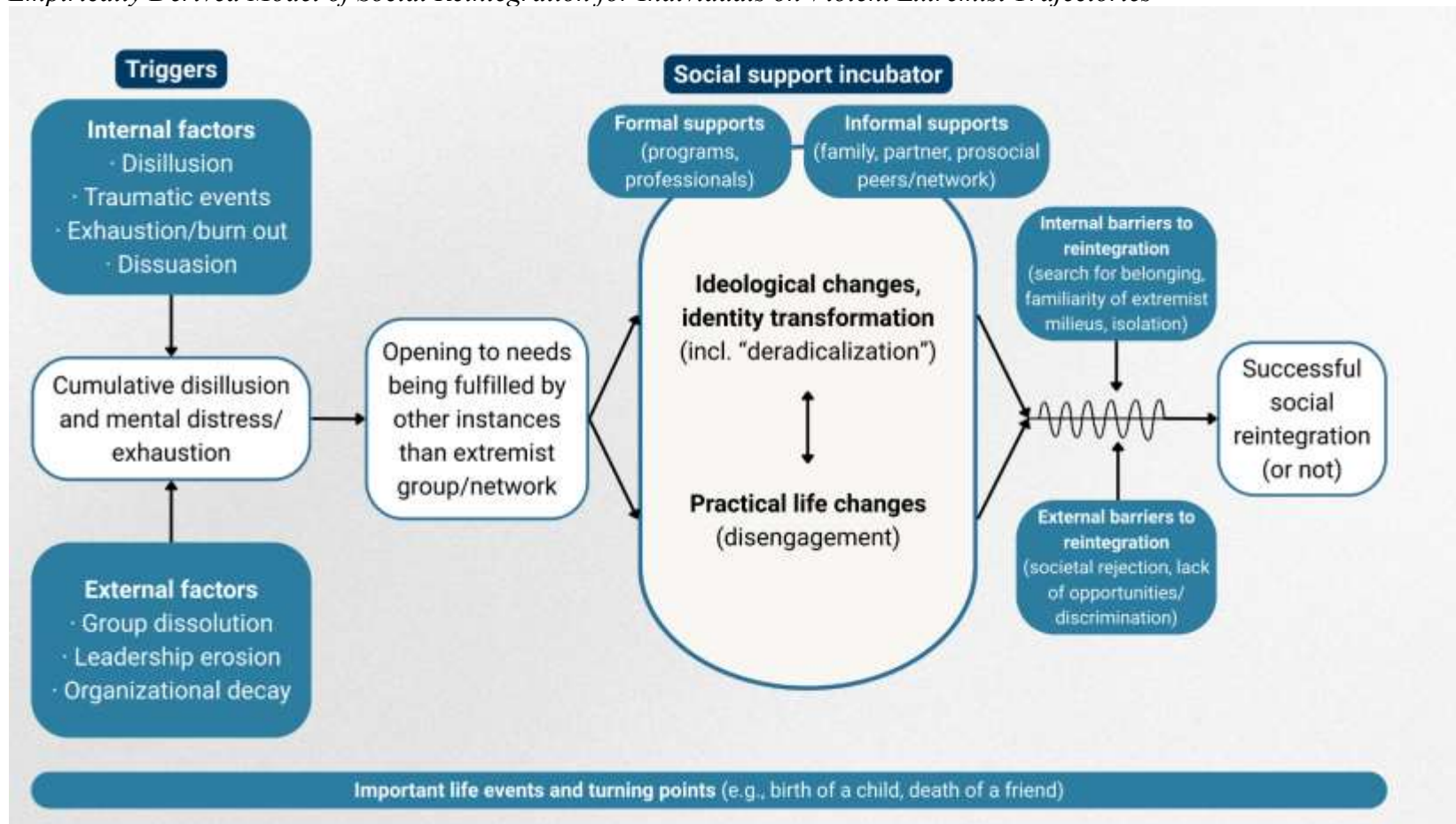
underlying belief systems often remain intact. UNDP (2023) and Pal and Chaudhary (2023) caution that coercive approaches tend to produce superficial compliance without addressing deeper motivations. Jensen and Simi (2019) argue that sustained desistance requires personalized interventions attentive to psychological needs, social support, and life history. Without this level of tailored engagement, exit efforts risk falling short of true transformation.

Empirically Derived Model of Social Reintegration for Individuals on Violent Extremist Trajectories

One of the objectives of this systematic review was to propose an empirically informed model of the social reintegration of individuals on violent extremist trajectories. The model synthesizes the principal themes identified across the Summary of the Evidence and thematic analyses, organizing them into three interrelated components: (1) the triggers that initiate the desistance process, (2) the social support incubator that facilitates, motivates, and sustains change, and (3) the barriers that can stall or reverse progress. Important life events and turning points such as parenthood, traumatic experiences, or major relational transitions intersect with all three components and may function as accelerators or impediments depending on the context. Figure 2 summarizes this dynamic system.

Figure 2

Empirically Derived Model of Social Reintegration for Individuals on Violent Extremist Trajectories



Triggers refer to the forces that set the reintegration process in motion by creating psychological openings for individuals to reconsider their involvement in violent extremism. These triggers arise from both internal and external sources. Internal triggers include experiences such as traumatic events (e.g., the death of a close associate), emotional exhaustion, and deterrence pressures, all of which reflect accumulating strain and cognitive-emotional conflict within the individual. External triggers involve destabilizing circumstances in the surrounding environment, such as group dissolution, leadership erosion, or organizational decay, which undermine confidence in the extremist milieu. Across the literature, these internal and external forces tend to converge in two central states: disillusionment and mental distress/exhaustion, that together weaken ideological commitment and prompt individuals to consider that their needs might be better met outside the extremist group or network. Significant life events can amplify these openings; for example, forming an unexpected friendship with an out-group member may crystallize existing doubts (Fisher-Smith et al., 2020). In this model, the role of triggers is to generate the initial psychological readiness for change, paralleling the precontemplation-to-contemplation transition described in the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska et al., 1992), where individuals begin to question previously unquestioned commitments and consider alternative courses of action.

Once this opening has occurred, progress toward reintegration depends on the presence of what we refer to as a social support incubator. This component captures the material, emotional, cognitive, and practical assistance that sustains movement away from extremism. The incubator encompasses both formal sources of support—such as tertiary PVE programs, psychological counselling, and vocational training—and informal sources rooted in the individual's personal networks, including family, partners, prosocial peers, and community members. These supports enable individuals to meet new needs for belonging, stability, structure, and purpose that arise once extremist environments no longer fulfill them. Life events can once again serve a catalytic function in this context; for instance, the formation of a romantic relationship outside the extremist milieu often provides both emotional anchoring and meaningful challenges to previously held extremist worldviews, particularly those grounded in othering, thereby helping open pathways into new social roles and identities.

Within the social support incubator, two core processes unfold and often reinforce one another: disengagement, referring primarily to behavioral changes such as reducing involvement in extremist activities and reorganizing daily routines (e.g., securing employment, pursuing education, or obtaining stable housing), and cognitive or identity change, referring to shifts in beliefs, the development of more nuanced worldviews, or spiritual reinterpretation (Barrelle, 2015; Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Although the term deradicalization is sometimes used to describe this second process, we prefer the formulation cognitive/identity change because it avoids the stigmatizing connotations often associated with deradicalization programs and more accurately reflects the psychological and narrative processes documented in desistance research, particularly in criminology (e.g., Maruna's [2001] work on identity transformation). These two processes are conceptually distinct. While they frequently interact (practical life changes can create space for cognitive reflection, and shifts in identity can motivate new behaviors), they do not need to occur simultaneously, nor do both need to be fully achieved for desistance to take place. Many individuals disengage behaviorally without a complete ideological shift, whereas others experience substantial cognitive or identity change before altering their behavior (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). In this model, both pathways are recognized as viable trajectories through which social reintegration can take root and become sustainable.

The final component of the model concerns the potential barriers to reintegration, which underscore the inherently nonlinear nature of post-exit trajectories (Horgan, 2009). Even when substantial progress has been made, individuals may face internal obstacles such as lingering needs for belonging, nostalgia for the familiarity and intensity of extremist milieus, or feelings of isolation and identity disruption. These internal barriers reflect psychological vulnerabilities that can draw individuals back toward extremist environments if new identities and support systems remain fragile. External barriers such as societal rejection, discrimination, employment or housing exclusion, and other structural constraints can similarly undermine reintegration (Altier et al., 2017; Carroll II, 2022; Windisch et al., 2019), a pattern also well documented in the desistance literature on crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Pager, 2003). These obstacles may, inadvertently, recreate the adversities that contributed to radicalization in the first place and can significantly narrow an individual's opportunities to pursue a prosocial life course.

Taken together, the model posits that social reintegration for individuals involved in violent extremism depends on the interaction of forces that initiate change, structures that sustain it, and obstacles that may hinder or reverse it. Successful reintegration emerges when triggers create openings for desistance, when these openings are consolidated within a supportive social environment capable of meeting both practical and identity-related needs, and when internal and external barriers are minimized or effectively managed.

Discussion

This systematic review examined how individuals disengage from violent extremism and reintegrate into society. Drawing on 149 empirical studies, it identified the main risk and protective factors shaping desistance trajectories and explored how individual, relational, and structural dimensions interact in this process. Although derived inductively from research on violent extremism, these findings closely mirror established patterns of desistance from crime and gang involvement (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015; Tonks & Stephenson, 2018).

Limitations of the Evidence Base

The current body of research on desistance from violent extremism is marked by several important limitations that constrain the reliability, comparability, and generalizability of the evidence. A first set of limitations relates to sample constraints and selection bias. Many studies rely on small, homogeneous groups drawn from narrow recruitment channels or snowball sampling methods (Azam & Fatima, 2017; Goodwin, 2022; Jørgensen, 2022; Windisch et al., 2019), and potential participants frequently decline involvement due to stigma, legal concerns, or fears of surveillance (Baudon, 2017; Gould, 2021; UNDP, 2023). As a result, samples tend to overrepresent individuals who are already partially disengaged, highly articulate, or willing to speak publicly, while excluding active members or those less confident about sharing their experiences (Baudon, 2017; Emser et al., 2022; Sieckelinck et al., 2019; Windisch et al., 2019). Some samples were tied to highly specific contexts (e.g., Colombian paramilitaries; Nussio, 2012) or relied on isolated single-case studies (Bonino, 2020), limiting generalizability. Gender representation was also uneven, as women and LGBTQ+ individuals remain underrepresented across the PVE literature (Duriesmith & Ismail, 2024; Liguori & Spanierman, 2022; Zahari et al., 2024). Moreover, studies differ in

how clearly they describe their samples; some provide detailed demographic and contextual information, whereas others offer only minimal description (Gould, 2021; UNDP, 2023).

A second group of limitations arises from the strong reliance on retrospective, self-reported, or unverified data. Evidence is often drawn from qualitative interviews, autobiographies, case notes, or online forums (Corner & Gill, 2020; Pal & Chaudhary, 2023; Thorburn, 2023), all of which are vulnerable to memory reconstruction, impression management, and social desirability bias (Altier et al., 2017; Simi et al., 2017; Windisch et al., 2019). Participants may selectively reinterpret their past, downplay prior ideological commitment, or emphasize turning points in ways that portray their trajectories as more coherent or rehabilitated (Carroll II, 2022; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018). Anonymous online settings introduce additional verification challenges, as researchers cannot always confirm participant identity or the authenticity of the information (Dwyer, 2013; Hwang et al., 2013; Osuna, 2024; Suyanto et al., 2022; Thorburn, 2023).

A third limitation concerns the lack of longitudinal evidence and the fragmented temporal designs of existing studies. Many studies are cross-sectional, preventing assessment of whether desistance is stable, temporary, or cyclical (Gould, 2021; Leviton, 2020; Riley & Schneider, 2022). Even when longitudinal designs are used, they often include only two time points (Nivette et al., 2022), short follow-up periods (Mitts, 2022), or high attrition, which tends to disproportionately exclude more radicalized or marginalized participants (Emser et al., 2022; Gaudette et al., 2023). By contrast, criminological research on desistance has long relied on longitudinal designs to capture stability, relapse, and life-course dynamics, with extensive evidence drawn from prospective and retrospective studies spanning years or decades (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2003; Lussier & Gress, 2014).

A fourth group of limitations reflects geographical, cultural, and ideological imbalances. The field remains dominated by research conducted in Western democracies, particularly North America and Europe (Chalmers, 2017; Liguori & Spanierman, 2022; UNDP, 2023). This raises concerns about whether desistance pathways observed in these contexts generalize to other sociopolitical settings (Azam & Fatima, 2017; Riley & Schneider, 2022). Ideological coverage is similarly uneven: jihadist and white supremacist extremism dominate the literature, while male supremacism, incel communities, and hybrid online movements remain underexamined (Osuna, 2024; Thorburn, 2023).

A fifth set of limitations relates to conceptual inconsistencies. Studies vary in how they define desistance, with some emphasizing behavioral withdrawal and others requiring ideological change or identity transformation (Baudon, 2017; van der Heide & Huurman, 2016). As a result, what constitutes successful desistance differs across studies, limiting comparability and complicating efforts to synthesize findings (Jensen & Simi, 2019). Broader operationalization challenges are also evident: validated indicators are rare, causal mechanisms are often inferred rather than tested, and evaluation frameworks vary substantially (Baudon, 2017; Cherney & Belton, 2023).

Finally, important content gaps further limit the scope of the literature. Broader structural factors such as poverty, education, and political exclusion are often acknowledged but rarely examined in depth (Florez-Morris, 2005; Jensen et al., 2023). Key dynamics, including online-to-offline pathways and the long-term stability of desistance, also remain insufficiently explored (Thorburn, 2023).

Despite these limitations, the existing literature provides rich and meaningful insights into how individuals leave violent extremist movements. As such, while caution is warranted in generalizing findings, this predominantly qualitative body of research nonetheless constitutes a valuable foundation for understanding the complexity, nonlinearity, and personal nature of desistance from violent extremism. In line with previous systematic reviews (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022, 2025b), it is also important to acknowledge that identifying limitations in the literature is much easier than overcoming the structural and practical challenges inherent to conducting research in this field. Issues such as access to participants, ethical constraints, and the sensitivity of the topic make the collection of robust and comprehensive data difficult. The limitations highlighted here should therefore not be interpreted as reflecting shortcomings in intent or rigor; rather, they largely reflect constraints recognized and explicitly acknowledged by the authors themselves.

Limitations of the Current Study

This systematic review has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. First, the synthesis does not provide a quantitative assessment of effect sizes or comparative impacts across desistance factors. Although we report how frequently each factor appeared across studies, these counts reflect visibility in the literature

rather than empirical magnitude or causal impact. The highly heterogeneous and predominantly qualitative nature of the evidence, combined with the small number of eligible quantitative studies, did not allow for the estimation of standardized effects or the identification of causal mechanisms. As such, our conclusions speak to patterns in the evidence rather than to the strength or relative importance of the influences identified.

Second, although we followed Campbell Collaboration procedures for systematic searching, screening, risk-of-bias assessment, and data extraction, the use of a methodological quality score to exclude papers during full-text coding is not part of formal Campbell guidelines. This step was taken to remove studies that contained insufficient methodological or substantive information to meaningfully contribute to the thematic synthesis. While this decision improved analytic feasibility, it nonetheless represents a deviation from standard Campbell practice and may have influenced the final pool of included studies.

Third, interrater agreement during title and abstract screening, as well as full-text review, was limited. Although disagreements were resolved through team discussions, the final selection of studies and extraction of relevant quotations remain inherently subjective processes. Because research assistants did not double-code the same papers, variation in individual coding practices may have resulted in some studies receiving greater visibility in the thematic synthesis than others. This limitation reflects the broader challenge of maintaining consistency when coding large, heterogeneous qualitative bodies of literature.

Fourth, the structure of the data extraction and coding framework may have influenced how findings were aggregated and interpreted. Because the extraction sheet was organized into predefined sections corresponding to broad categories of desistance-related factors, the distinction between major domains of protective and facilitating influences was established a priori rather than emerging fully inductively from the data. This analytic structuring likely shaped how findings were grouped across studies and, consequently, the patterns that emerged from the synthesis. Had a different configuration of factor categories been specified at the outset, some findings may have been aggregated differently, potentially leading to alternative emphases or interpretations.

Fifth, although our synthesis identifies broad patterns across desistance pathways, it does not provide extensive comparative analyses by ideology, country, or group type. This was an intentional choice, as the current state of the literature suggests that many desistance

processes are broadly generalizable across movements and ideologies, and overly narrow subgroup analyses risk overstating differences that the data cannot reliably support. Nevertheless, this limits the granularity of the conclusions for specific extremist milieus.

Sixth, our review was not outcome-driven. We did not systematically distinguish between factors associated with disengagement and those associated with deradicalization, largely because primary studies rarely defined or measured these outcomes distinctly. The scarcity of quantitative research further restricted our ability to examine whether particular factors differentially predict behavioral versus ideological change. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as relating to broad desistance processes rather than to outcome-specific mechanisms.

Finally, because AI was used as a support tool for qualitative thematic analysis, additional methodological and ethical considerations arise. While AI models such as ChatGPT can efficiently summarize text and identify recurring patterns, they are probabilistic systems that cannot independently interpret meaning, account for context, or exercise reflexivity—core elements of qualitative inquiry. As Cook et al. (2025) note, AI excels at pattern recognition but lacks the interpretive depth required for thematic reasoning, often reproducing surface-level regularities while struggling to articulate more complex conceptual linkages. Moreover, outputs may vary depending on prompt phrasing, introducing potential methodological instability and placing responsibility on researchers to design and iteratively refine instructions (Chubb, 2023). Although several prompt formulations and document structures were tested before the final workflow was selected, we did not compare competing AI models or assess the reproducibility of outputs across repeated analyses; another model or workflow might therefore have produced different thematic emphases. AI systems may also generate inaccurate or unsupported interpretations (“hallucinations”) that appear coherent but are not grounded in the data (Cooperman & Brandão, 2024).

To mitigate these risks, all AI-generated summaries were systematically reviewed, corrected, and validated by the research team. Initial pattern identification was supported by AI, but all final interpretive judgments were made by human researchers. This approach is consistent with emerging guidance on the responsible use of generative AI in research and higher education (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation & Commission de l'éthique en science et en technologie, 2024; Université du Québec, 2025). In line with these recommendations, the

manuscript explicitly discloses the use of ChatGPT and clarifies that its role was restricted to supporting the synthesis of material within a human-defined analytical framework.

Implications for Research

The limitations identified in the current evidence base underscore clear opportunities for methodological improvement and innovation. While there is already a robust qualitative understanding of desistance from violent extremism, further quantitative research is needed to estimate effect sizes and enable meta-analytic syntheses that can consolidate empirical findings. In parallel, longitudinal and cohort-based designs should be prioritized to better capture the evolution of desistance processes over time and to strengthen causal inferences regarding intervention outcomes, which are currently constrained by the predominance of retrospective designs and open-source data.

Improving sampling strategies remains equally important. Future studies should aim to address recurring limitations such as small sample sizes, reliance on convenience or snowball sampling, participant homogeneity, and selection bias. Efforts to access more diverse populations, including individuals at different stages of disengagement, would significantly enhance the external validity and representativeness of findings.

Greater conceptual clarity is also needed. In particular, more consistent distinctions between disengagement and deradicalization, as well as clearer operationalizations of desistance, would improve comparability across studies and strengthen cumulative knowledge development.

The field would further benefit from broadening its scope and diversity. This includes expanding research beyond Western contexts, extending the focus beyond Islamist and far-right extremism to other forms of ideological and group-based violence (e.g., nihilistic violence), and developing more systematic gender-specific analyses, which remain insufficiently addressed in the current literature.

Finally, a promising avenue for future research concerns the role of disillusionment. Studies could assess whether interventions that support individuals in recognizing dissatisfaction with extremist involvement facilitate disengagement, while also evaluating potential iatrogenic effects. Particular attention should be given to issues of timing and

receptivity, to better understand when such approaches are most likely to be effective—or, conversely, counterproductive.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Violent extremism desistance narratives point to several implications for practice and policy. First, practitioners should prioritize facilitating access to alternative pathways of belonging (e.g., employment, relationships, and community participation), rather than focusing exclusively on risk suppression or the severing of ties with extremist milieus. While reducing risk is necessary for public safety, it is rarely sufficient to motivate sustained change among individuals of concern. A core critique advanced by the Good Lives Model (Ward & Maruna, 2007) is that risk-focused approaches are inherently deficit-oriented: they aim to eliminate problematic behaviors without necessarily providing meaningful and attainable alternatives. As a result, they may leave a motivational and relational void, particularly when extremist involvement previously fulfilled core psychological and social needs. In this sense, fostering a “good life” is not only preventative but also generative, as it can support narrative and identity reconstruction processes (Maruna, 2001).

Holistic, strength-based approaches naturally align with ecosystemic perspectives on intervention, which emphasize that PVE efforts should not be confined to a single institutional setting but instead deployed across the broader ecosystem in which individuals are situated (Curtis et al., 2004). In practice, this suggests that PVE responses are likely to benefit from multisectoral efforts grounded in a continuity-of-care framework, ensuring coherence and support over time and across key transitions (e.g., from custody to community). This, in turn, requires sustained collaboration between justice, health, education, employment, and community sectors, supported by policy-level investments in integrated, multi-team coordination structures (McKenzie & O’Brien, 2024; Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019). More broadly, such an approach reflects a “whole-of-society” orientation, in which prevention and reintegration are understood as shared responsibilities rather than the mandate of any single sector. Similar principles have been emphasized in efforts to prevent other forms of group-based and collective violence, such as street gang involvement (Spergel & Grossman, 1997).

At the policy level, ensuring sustained investment in reintegration infrastructures such as employment programs, housing support, and community-based initiatives is critical for making prosocial pathways accessible. Such investments are justified by consistent evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of disengagement programs in PVE contexts (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025a; van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018), as well as social reintegration interventions in correctional settings (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Equally important is the need to address stigma and discrimination, which can undermine these efforts by restricting access to employment, housing, and social participation. Policy responses may include employer incentives, anti-discrimination measures, or mechanisms that mitigate the long-term consequences of criminal records (Pager, 2003).

Finally, despite the central role of ideological and cognitive changes in desistance from violent extremism, the present findings suggest caution in how such changes are targeted in practice. The role attributed to ideology has shifted considerably within the field. Earlier accounts often treated ideology as the primary driver of extremist involvement, whereas subsequent scholarship emphasized the weak correspondence between extremist beliefs and violent behavior and increasingly foregrounded social, psychological, and situational processes (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025a). More recent work has moved toward an intermediate position: ideology is neither sufficient to explain violence nor irrelevant, but may shape how individuals interpret grievances, identities, moral obligations, and the legitimacy of violence (Dawson, 2018; Holbrook & Horgan, 2019; Koehler, 2025; Peels, 2025, 2026). This more nuanced understanding is particularly important in a contemporary landscape where ideological commitments may be hybrid, composite, idiosyncratic, or partly nihilistic rather than organized around a single coherent doctrine (Astley, 2025; Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2025; Hemmila & Perliger, 2025; Rousseau et al., 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026; Tibby, 2026).

Recognizing that ideology may matter, however, does not imply that directly targeting ideological beliefs will necessarily produce change. Studies examining belief-focused deradicalization efforts have generally reported mixed or limited results, suggesting that such work is difficult and contingent on conditions such as individual readiness, intervention timing, the quality of the therapeutic alliance, and the credibility of the person delivering the intervention (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2025a). Although the studies included in the present review often portrayed former extremists, spiritual leaders, and other lived-experience

messengers positively, more recent research indicates that credibility is not automatically conferred by former status and may vary according to the messenger, audience, setting, and mode of engagement (Gansewig & Walsh, 2024; Koehler et al., 2025a, 2025b; Walsh & Gansewig, 2019). As a result, attempts to impose ideological change prematurely may be ineffective or even counterproductive (Hassan et al., 2018). Evidence regarding counter-narrative campaigns is likewise mixed, with findings suggesting that externally delivered messages may be less effective than approaches that actively involve individuals in generating alternative interpretations (Carthy & Sarma, 2023; Hassan et al., 2026).

A more promising alternative may involve engaging with the emotional experiences that underlie individuals' worldviews. Interventions can support individuals in reflecting on the emotional costs of extremist involvement, including exhaustion, unmet psychological needs, and the gradual loss of meaning within the group. These processes align with patterns of cumulative disillusionment and may create conditions conducive to change without requiring direct ideological confrontation. In this context, more explicit forms of ideological reframing may be best reserved for situations in which individuals express openness or actively seek such engagement. At the same time, when ideological shifts do occur—whether spontaneously or through intervention—they should be recognized and reinforced as transformative milestones that help consolidate trajectories of change.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of global evidence on desistance from violent extremism, integrating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies across ideological movements and world regions. A central insight emerging from this synthesis is that desistance is not only about abandoning extremist beliefs, but about reconstructing identity, meaning, and belonging. This process depends not only on individual motivation, but also on the opportunities and constraints encountered in the social environment. In this sense, desistance is fundamentally ecosystemic, unfolding across interconnected social contexts and requiring coordinated responses across sectors. Sustained exit therefore depends not only on the efforts of individuals, but also on the capacity of institutions and communities to create the conditions that make such trajectories possible.

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