

Ending Violent Behaviour and Fragmenting Movements



This is an extract from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue publication.

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[On the Front Line: A guide to countering far-right extremism](#)

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Introduction

Though intervention is one of the most important and effective ways of having an impact on existing movements, it is rarely done by governments. In an ideal scenario, it should be done as a loose cooperation between government and civil society. The reality is that this work is often done by just a handful of qualified front-line specialists in each country, who often struggle for funding but pull far more than their weight in terms of impact. Practitioners adopt a number of approaches to help right-wing extremists to change their behaviour and avoid using violence.

GLOSSARY

Group dissolution: Break down or weaken local far-right extremist groups

Disengagement: Change a person's behaviour away from violence

De-radicalisation: Change a person's views away from far-right extremist ideology

Exit: Provide a way out of extremist movements for those who are ready to leave

Key approaches

1. One-to-One interventions

Aim to build rapport with an individual involved in far-right extremist activity in order to widen the gap between them and the movement, demonstrate the consequences of their actions, help them to identify a different life path, and support them to achieve it. The length of intervention will vary according to need. They can also be conducted with groups; they have successfully dissolved youth street groups in Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

The Empowerment Conversation, Oslo Police, Norway

Aims/Objectives:

To push young people on the peripheries of the far right to consider their future ambitions, and empower them to leave far right street groups and pursue their goals.

Description/Activities:

The Empowerment Conversation is one component of an approach devised by Oslo Municipality Police. Individuals within or on the periphery of a far-right group are invited in for a one-to-one session with a preventative police officer. Participants are asked to create a 'social network map' during this conversation, to expose any social connections to known radicals, which is then used to assess their position in, or motivations for being part of, a particular group. Conversations often focus on the individual's motivations and goals in life, and demonstrating the consequences of involvement in criminal activity on the person's ability to achieve their goals. The aim is to empower individuals to envision the achievements and lifestyle they could have outside of a far-right movement, and assist them in transitioning away from the movement. The Empowerment Conversation was initially used

during preventative police work with racist and skinhead youth groups, but has since been applied to a variety of different youth delinquency problems. It has been most effective when parents are actively involved.

2. Exit programmes

Aim to offer a structured route out of extremist movements through de-radicalisation and a longer-term support package to re-integrate into society.

These involve one-to-one interventions, but also include counselling and intense psychological support, practical help with housing and jobs and pursuit of interests and goals. Practitioners take different approaches to the balance between challenging and reshaping ideology and practical help or social support. Some are initiated in prison. They largely rely on voluntary participation.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Exit Deutschland, Germany

Aims/Objectives:

To support right-wing extremists to leave the German neo-Nazi scene through long-term disengagement and de-radicalisation programmes.

Description/Activities:

Founded in 2000, Exit Deutschland is an initiative that provides support, advice and assistance for individuals seeking to leave the right-wing extremist scene. Exit Deutschland's work involves providing support to right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis who seek a departure from the movement. Exit Deutschland provides one-to-one support and gives practical aid, as well as offering guidance on personal safety and legal issues. They address the ideology of participants directly during the process of de-radicalisation, working to change perceptions and perspectives from

their prevailing far-right beliefs and narratives. Exit Deutschland emphasise the importance of establishing long-term, trustful relationships between caseworkers and clients. They have developed a case management system that teaches the core concepts of their work to employees: ideology, security, and intervention and dialogue techniques. Exit Deutschland also provides advice to the families and friends of people in extremist movements.

Getting it right

Where to intervene?

Most interventions are best delivered locally, but it is important to think broader – groups work across borders, local and international. Individuals are also influenced by what they see online, as well as their peer group in the local area. Many intervention providers travel to their clients' location for one-to-one meetings. This work is also increasingly done in prisons, which can be an important place for behavioural or ideological change.

When to intervene

The best time to work with an individual is when they are considering joining or leaving a movement. It can be effective to reach out to far-right extremists in the aftermath of a violent incident associated with a far-right group, such as a murder or attack; for example, preventive police in Norway did this following the murder of Benjamin Hermansen by the BootBoys and the size of the movement dropped by half. Interventions shortly before release from prison can be effective when individuals are contemplating their future.

How to intervene

It is vital to approach individuals without judgement. Labelling people – e.g. 'right-wing extremist' or 'fascist' – creates barriers. Using personal stories can help to build bridges, although those intervening should be careful to maintain professional boundaries and protect their own safety.

The programme has to have something to offer – it has to be able to compete with far-right extremist movements: this might include help securing a job, membership of a youth club or opportunities to pursue interests. It is also vital to individualise support to the person's needs, taking into account their personal history, ambitions and characteristics (such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and interests).

Who should intervene

Having the right background matters – former extremists can be powerful in this role as they have credibility; those who share a social background may find it easier to strike up a rapport; and even fashion preferences can make a difference at the start of a relationship. Gender can be important in some contexts, for example, women may require female intervention providers, and some extreme right males' perspectives on women may impact their relationship with female intervention providers.

Profile

Some programmes rely on referrals from social services or government programmes, such as *Channel* in the UK, while others rely on individuals seeking out assistance. For the latter, it is important that the programme is well known to members of far-right extremist movements so they know where to come when they decide to exit. This might be achieved through building a presence at far-right events, establishing relationships with individuals, or running campaigns (e.g. Exit Deutschland 'Trojan T-shirt' campaign which saw referrals increase three-fold). It is important to consider safety when doing so, as well as the structure of the far right scene. Rather than confronting movements directly, it may make sense to build a strong web presence to ensure the programme can be found through relevant web searches.

When to talk ideology

There is disagreement about when to engage in discussions about ideology with those exiting far-right extremist movements. Some programmes, like Exit Sweden, avoid these discussions because they believe people enter movements for other reasons (e.g. emotional and social) and are

well rehearsed in counter-arguments, which would lead to a defensive pose uncondusive to bonding. Others, like Exit Deutschland actively challenge and engage with extremist ideologies in an attempt to build a new world view. Structure of the far right scene, context and personal circumstance matter too.

Where ideologies are confronted, extreme caution is required: only within the bounds of a pre-existing trusted relationship; show understanding for the other person's concerns; and do not approach from a 'right/wrong' perspective. Direct challenge can be counter-productive.

Stay on the right side of the law

The legal obligations of front-line workers in relation to informing authorities of past or possible future crimes vary from country to country. In some countries, intervention providers are not obliged to report crimes that have been committed already, but might be obliged to report knowledge of severe crimes before they happen. Some front-line workers tell clients not to tell them if they are planning to use violence. However, sometimes this is not a choice as clients rely on their case managers to talk them away from committing an act of violence.

Supporting yourself and staff

Being confronted with hate on a daily basis can be emotionally taxing, particularly when it becomes personal. It is important that exit and intervention providers have strong support networks to speak about their work and how it is affecting them. In some cases, organisations have lined up external support, or have a trained therapist or counsellor in-house. This support can also be found informally from colleagues, similar professionals abroad, or friends and family. Aggreddi, a violence intervention programme in Finland, has a room in its office devoted to time out – an important space for intervention staff to take a break from this difficult work.

The problem of far-right extremism will not go away in the near future. This is no easy challenge, however this project aims to offer a platform for the good work that is being done across Europe to prevent, intervene and respond to this challenge. Cross-border exchange at the European level encourages innovation, will allow us to learn faster, and means that those with less experience can learn from those with more. This is the first set of resources in the FREE Initiative, which will grow over time as new methods are tried and tested and new lessons learned. Visit www.theFREEinitiative.com for inspirational films, testimonies and case studies on tackling far-right extremism across Europe.

About the author

Vidhya Ramalingam is Research and Policy Manager at ISD, leading a programme of work on far-right extremism and intolerance. She regularly briefs governments and NGOs on far-right extremism across Europe, and methods for response and intervention. Her work on the far right has been featured in the Guardian, the Telegraph, Huffington Post, the New Statesman, and international press. Vidhya holds an MPhil in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Anthropology and Inequality Studies from Cornell University.

