



Danish Centre for
Prevention of Extremism

Knowledge synthesis - synopsis

MAPPING OF KNOWLEDGE OF EXTREMISM

Content

Background to the knowledge synthesis	3
Definition of extremism and radicalisation	4
General synthesis	5
Knowledge of extremism at societal level	6
Knowledge of extremism at group level	7
Knowledge of extremism at individual level	9
Knowledge of individuals' pathways into and out of extremism	11
Knowledge landscape	12
Where can I find out more?	13

Background to the knowledge synthesis

The Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism (referred to below as the Centre) has commissioned a knowledge mapping initiative which aims to map the current best knowledge as regards extremism and radicalisation and prevention of these¹. A knowledge synthesis that summarises the most important knowledge in the field has been prepared on this basis. This synopsis provides a general overview of the most important conclusions and points contained in the synthesis.

What is a knowledge synthesis?

A knowledge synthesis is a summary of the currently best available knowledge in a specific field. This knowledge synthesis summarises knowledge as regards extremism and the prevention of extremism that is of relevance from a Danish prevention perspective. The knowledge synthesis also describes the strength and character of the knowledge identified in the field. The knowledge synthesis is based on a review of 65 selected publications.

The knowledge synthesis is primarily aimed at professionals in Denmark such as SSP consultants (SSP refers to a partnership between school social services and police), police officers working with crime prevention, the PSP cooperation (PSP refers to a partnership between the psychiatric services, social services and police), and others. The intention is to provide professionals with a stronger knowledge base for their work. At the same time, the synthesis should strengthen the knowledge base for the outward-facing advisory initiatives for municipalities and professionals working with prevention of extremism.

From a Danish prevention perspective, a number of choices have been made in relation to the focus and delimitation of the knowledge synthesis. Therefore, under no circumstances are knowledge of extremism and prevention of extremism covered in full. Instead, the synthesis sets out the knowledge that is most relevant to explore from a Danish prevention perspective.

In specific terms, this synopsis focuses on knowledge of extremism, while a similar synopsis has been compiled which focuses on knowledge of prevention of extremism. Reading the full knowledge synthesis is recommended in order to derive the most benefit from the knowledge gathered.

Have an interesting read!

¹ The knowledge mapping has been prepared by Rambøll Management Consulting in 2017-18.

Definition of extremism and radicalisation

Extremism and radicalisation are two key terms in the synthesis. The understanding of the two terms follows the understanding specified in the government's national action plan of 2016 on the prevention of extremism and radicalisation.

Extremism and radicalisation are defined as follows:

Extremism refers to persons or groups that commit or seek to legitimise violence or other illegal acts, with reference to societal conditions that they disagree with. The term covers e.g. left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism.

Radicalisation refers to a short- or long-term process where persons subscribe to extremist views or legitimise their actions on the basis of extremist ideologies

(Source: National action plan on prevention of extremism and radicalisation, 2016)

For the sake of simplicity, 'prevention of extremism and radicalisation' is designated 'prevention of extremism' in the synthesis.

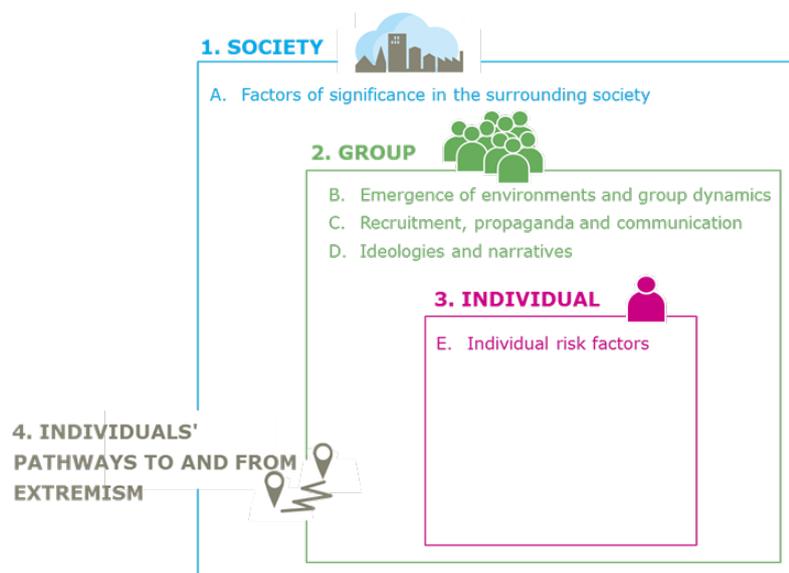
General synthesis

Generally, extremism is a phenomenon that is created in a complex interplay involving factors at a societal level, group level and individual level:

- **The societal level** focuses on the general societal dynamics and factors in the surrounding society that are of significance to extremism. This may include perception of discrimination or injustice, for example.
- **The group level** focuses on the dynamics and factors of significance to the emergence and maintenance of extremist groups, as well as groups' ideologies and narratives and their recruitment, propaganda and communication. This may, for example, include social interactions in groups, the significance of the ideology to extremism, or the role of social media in relation to recruitment.
- **The individual level** focuses on the factors of significance to the individual's risk of or vulnerability to extremism. An uncertain existence or unstable family situation is potential risk factors.

The societal level constitutes the broader framework for the emergence and maintenance of the extremist group, both ideologically and socially, and for the recruitment, propaganda and communication activities of the extremist group. Within the same framework, the vulnerability of the individual to extremism and what the extremist group has to offer may be understood as being conditional upon a series of risk factors.

The individual's pathway to and from extremism may differ considerably, although typically this can take many different forms and courses and is influenced by interaction of factors at all three levels.



The general knowledge synthesis is expanded upon in greater detail on pages 9-10 in the full version of the knowledge synthesis.

Knowledge of extremism at societal level

The societal level focuses on factors in the surrounding society that are of significance to extremism. This is understood to mean the social structures that define the framework for the emergence of extremist groups and interaction with the individual's radicalisation process. In general terms, individuals' perception of external social pressure against specific groups or viewpoints may be a significant factor in extremism.

Knowledge landscape at the societal level

Limited knowledge in the literature from 2010 onwards has been identified, specifically with regard to factors in the surrounding society that are of significance to the emergence and maintenance of extremism. This is why the knowledge mapping effort has been supplemented with a single publication prior to 2010 that has been indicated by means of assistance from researchers.

Perception of external pressure from society or perceived injustice contributes to radicalisation

Some knowledge indicates that the perception of oppression at societal level is a factor of significance to extremism. The fact that selected groups perceive pressure from society in the form of discrimination, marginalisation or a lack of affiliation with the surrounding society is of significance to extremism. Here, the perception of injustice or marginalisation, and not necessarily objective injustice, is what is crucial to extremism.

Resistance to the values and norms of established society may also be a significant factor in extremism. This may take the form of a violent counterculture among young people (see the box below). Similarly, resistance from society to extremist groups may contribute to the groups closing in on themselves to a greater extent. This may lead to increased radicalisation and distancing from society.

A violent counterculture

Roy (2017) highlights the fact that a violent counterculture is expressed by means of Islamist extremist groups that reject modern values and ways of life. The same was seen previously in the context of left-wing extremist groups such as the Blekingegade Gang in Denmark and the Red Army Faction in Germany.

There is no consensus on the role played by events or conflicts in the individual's own country or other countries. Events and conflicts are mentioned as a factor of significance in the radicalisation of individuals, but conversely there is no knowledge of the specific significance of wars in other countries, for example, to the individual's radicalisation process.

More information on knowledge of extremism at societal level can be found on pages 10-14 in the full version of the knowledge synthesis.

Knowledge of extremism at group level

The group level focuses on the factors of significance to the emergence and maintenance of extremist groups. Group dynamics are an important factor in the development of individuals and groups in an extremist direction. Recruitment to extremist groups may involve both a top-down and a bottom-up aspect and in particular takes place by means of close relationships and among vulnerable individuals. At the same time, ideology is merely one of several factors in a radicalisation process.

The knowledge landscape at the group level

At group level, the mapping has focused on the emergence of environments and group dynamics, recruitment, propaganda and communication and ideologies and narratives. A number of publications relating to knowledge concerning the emergence of extremist environments and group dynamics have been found. Conversely, literature on propaganda and communication is limited and focuses particularly on the Internet and social media. In particular, there is a lack of knowledge of how propaganda and recruitment are used offline and via non-electronic media. Furthermore, knowledge of ideology and narratives and their significance to extremist environments have been identified to a limited extent.

Social mechanisms are a driving force for radicalisation

There is general consensus that group dynamics are a significant factor in the emergence of extremist environments. Among other things, social interaction among members of the group may reinforce the radicalisation process. Interaction with members of the group who have more extreme opinions can increase other group members' acceptance of these. In the same way, the individual's social networks and affiliation are of significance to links to extremist groups.

Maintenance of extremist groups is a dynamic phenomenon. The factors that help to maintain extremist groups are not necessarily the same factors that originally contributed to the formation of such groups.

Recruitment may take the form of both top-down and bottom-up processes

There is general consensus that recruitment may take the form of both top-down and bottom-up processes. Top-down processes may involve a number of tactics used by members of extremist groups to identify and screen potential recruits. With the bottom-up process, individuals themselves seek out extremist environments or ideologies. The top-down and bottom-up processes may run separately or concurrently.

Some knowledge indicates that recruitment particularly takes place via close social relationships – families, friends and networks – and that conditions are more productive among vulnerable individuals.

Recruitment among vulnerable individuals

Basra et al. (2016) and EIP (2017) conclude that recruitment to networks of Islamist extremists may take place in socially disadvantaged environments such as prisons or socially disadvantaged residential areas. Here, individuals are isolated from the outside world and are lacking opportunities for education and employment, as well as close relationships outside their disadvantaged surroundings.

Social media and extremist recruitment

There is no consensus on the significance of the Internet to recruitment and radicalisation. On the one hand, social media is viewed as an opportunity for recruitment and discussion on extremist opinions. On the other hand, others perceive the Internet to be a less interactive and strategic tool where individuals can explore and collect information shared by extremist environments. Therefore, the significance of the Internet to radicalisation remains unclear.

Another point is that regardless of the significance of social media, most extremists are still introduced to the extremist ideology by socialising offline.

Ideology is of varying significance and weight in the radicalisation process of individuals

There is general consensus that ideology or religion is not decisive for the radicalisation of the individual. In general, ideology is highlighted as one of a number of factors that influence the radicalisation process. This means that ideology and religion may potentially have a part to play, but they are not necessarily the crucial factor in the radicalisation process. The ideology of extremist groups is of varying significance and weight as regards the pathways of various individuals to and out of extremism.

At the same time, extremism is viewed by a number of people as being based on political considerations rather than religion, and both ideology and religion may help to legitimise extremist involvement and actions. However, there is no consensus on how ideology and religion should be understood in relation to one another, or on whether ideology and religion should be perceived as two separate concepts or one collective concept.

More information on knowledge of extremism at group level can be found on pages 15-24 in the full version of the knowledge synthesis.

Knowledge of extremism at individual level

At individual level, the knowledge synthesis has focused on the subtopic of individual risk factors. This is understood to mean factors that can increase the individual's risk of or vulnerability to radicalisation. Threatened identity, mental vulnerability and (previous) involvement in crime are examples of risk factors. These risk factors must be viewed in a broader context where it does not go without saying that the existence of risk factors will lead to extremism.

The knowledge landscape at the individual level

A number of publications on individual risk factors are available in the included literature. Compared with the other two levels, the individual level is the level at which most literature is found. However, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the link between mental vulnerability and extremism, and knowledge of the significance of gender to the individual's risk of extremism.

Threatened identity and life attachment may lead to extremism

There is general consensus that a threatened identity or life attachment is a risk factor in the individual's pathway into extremism. Life attachment is all about the individual's perception of having a firm grip on their existence. Among other things, this involves the individual participating in close communities and society in general, such as in education, employment and leisure interests. Threatened life attachment may be caused by social exclusion, marginalisation or discrimination. If an individual feels that their identity or life attachment is under threat, they may seek a new point of reference in life; and this may involve extremism or affiliation to an extremist group.

The individual's family situation during childhood may also be of significance to the individual's pathway into extremism. In particular, individuals who have experienced social disadvantage or unstable family situations appear to be at increased risk of radicalisation. Risk factors may, for example, include lack of parental contact, physical or sexual abuse, parental neglect, loss of family members, divorce and mental vulnerability among family members.

Mental vulnerability may be a risk factor, particularly for lone wolf terrorists

There is no consensus on the link between mental vulnerability and extremism. Some publications find no increase in the incidence of mental vulnerability among terrorists, while others view mental vulnerability as one of a number of significant factors. However, in general it is agreed that individuals who commit terrorist acts are initially not deranged or irrational.

Understanding of mental vulnerability

The mapping initiative uses the term 'mental vulnerability' to denote a broad spectrum of problems. The included literature discusses matters such as mental developmental disorders, depression, autism spectrum disorders, schizophrenia and paranoid psychosis.

Mental vulnerability must be viewed in relation to the type of terrorism. For example, there is an increased incidence of mental vulnerability among lone wolf terrorists in comparison with the general population. At the same time, specific mental diagnoses are found in lone wolf terrorists: schizophrenia, paranoid psychoses and autism spectrum disorders. Conversely depression, mental diagnoses relating to sleep and mental developmental disorders are less widespread.

Conversely, the radicalisation process and being part of an extremist group may also lead to mental vulnerability. Specifically, being part of an extremist group that is isolated from the rest of society may be mentally stressful. Therefore, the link between mental vulnerability and extremism is not without ambiguity.

Movements from criminal environments

Some knowledge highlights the fact that extremist environments may be attractive to individuals who have previously committed crimes. An increasing proportion of offenders convicted of terrorism have a criminal or violent background as well. This is linked with the fact that criminals can transfer their knowledge and behaviour from criminal environments to extremist environments. For instance, they may have a knowledge of weapons or the planning of criminal acts. Furthermore, previous criminal experience with violence helps to soften the boundary to participation in extremist acts.

Extremism as salvation and justification of criminal acts

Basra et al. (2016) explain that Islamist Extremism environments appeal to people with a criminal background as they are consistent with their search for a place where they can justify their criminal acts or seek salvation for criminal acts they have committed previously.

More information on knowledge of extremism at individual level can be found on pages 24-28 in the full version of the knowledge synthesis.

Knowledge of individuals' pathways into and out of extremism

Individuals' pathways into and out of extremism may vary widely. Generally, these pathways are shaped as part of an interplay involving factors at societal level, group level and individual level.

The knowledge landscape for individuals' pathways into and out of extremism

A certain amount of literature relating to the individual's pathway into and out of extremism has been found. Most of the literature highlights the pathway into extremism, and there is less literature about the pathway out of extremism. The research appears to have moved away from earlier focus on phases in the radicalisation process and the profiles of individuals, now examining the various pathways taken by individuals into and out of extremism.

Individuals' pathways take different forms across societal, group and individual level

There is general consensus that individuals' pathways into and out of extremism may vary widely, and may be influenced by factors at societal, group and individual levels to varying extents. These factors are described under the three levels and may, for example, include perceived social pressure, the extremist group's offer of affiliation, or individual risk factors. In particular, group-related and social motivation factors are highlighted as crucial to individuals' pathways into extremism, while individual factors are also cited as important. Societal factors are ascribed less significance, and significance to differing degrees.

Various mechanisms may be of significance to the individual's pathway into and out of extremism. Such mechanisms may, for example, be divided into factors such as ideological motivation, group status, a sense of community, group pressure and perception of discrimination. Individually, these mechanisms may be of greater or lesser importance to the individual.

Key factors for the pathway out of extremism

Some knowledge indicates that the pathway out of extremism may take the form of disengagement can take the form of disengagement from extremist groups and activities and alteration of the individual's convictions.

Factors of significance to the individual's pathway out of extremism include disappointment or disagreements with the group, failure to meet expectations regarding the purpose of the group, mental fatigue and loathing of violent methods. Furthermore, social relationships and contact with the surrounding community may support the pathway out or changes in the individual's focus: if the individual finds a job, has a child or embarks upon a serious relationship, for instance.

More information on knowledge of the individual's pathways into and out of extremism on pages 29-32 in the full version of the knowledge synthesis.

Knowledge landscape

Besides summing up the most important knowledge, another purpose of the knowledge synthesis has been to describe the knowledge landscape in the field. The knowledge landscape is a description of areas where knowledge is solid, areas where knowledge is less solid, and areas where there is a need for more knowledge. There is generally a need for more knowledge in all areas, but in particular the societal level and right-wing and left-wing extremism are calling for greater emphasis.

The knowledge landscape for knowledge of extremism is generally characterised by limited knowledge across the societal, group and individual levels, and the literature is based less extensively on knowledge collected directly from extremist environments. The knowledge landscape may also be described as fragmented, which means that knowledge is spread across various specialist fields and that there is no consensus on how extremism and radicalisation are to be understood as concepts.

At the societal level, there is limited or no knowledge about the factors in the surrounding society that are of significance to extremism. Societal level primarily involves knowledge of Islamist extremism, while knowledge of right-wing and left-wing extremism is more limited.

At the group level, there is particular knowledge with regard to the emergence of extremist environments and group dynamics. There is less knowledge of ideology and narratives and their significance to extremist environments.

As regards knowledge of propaganda and communication, there is predominantly emphasis on the significance of the Internet and social media, while knowledge of communication via offline media and classic channels such as distribution of propaganda is limited.

There is primarily knowledge of Islamist extremism, while some publications focus on a number of types of extremism across boundaries. Knowledge of right-wing and left-wing extremism is limited.

At the individual level, there is movement from focus on phases and profiles to **the individual's pathways into and out of extremism**. Moreover, there is greater focus on risk factors, including the significance of problems of social well-being, mental vulnerability and family conditions. This also brings with it movement from focus on causal links to a more complex understanding of the interplay between various factors.

Knowledge at the individual level frequently refers to extremism as a collective phenomenon or Islamist extremism specifically, while left-wing and right-wing extremism are examined to a limited extent.

Where can I find out more?

You can find out more about the results of the knowledge mapping effort here:

- **The knowledge synthesis** summarises in a readily accessible manner the mapped knowledge of extremism and the prevention of extremism. The individual topics are described in greater detail in the knowledge synthesis, with sources and examples. The knowledge synthesis also includes a general characteristic of the knowledge landscape in the field.
- A **knowledge catalogue** that summarises the studies that form a basis for the knowledge synthesis. This knowledge catalogue provides a more in-depth insight into each individual publication.
- **A synopsis on knowledge of prevention of extremism:** A synopsis has been compiled, in the same way as this synopsis, on the main conclusions for knowledge of prevention of extremism.

All of these products can be read as extensions of one another, or individually with emphasis on specific themes.

You can also find out more about extremism and the prevention at the website of the Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism: www.stopekstremisme.dk

Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism

The Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism was established in 2017 as part of the social financing agreement. The purpose of the Centre is to reinforce the Danish initiative for prevention of extremism and radicalisation at a national, local and online level. The Centre therefore underpins preventive work among municipalities, regions, crime prevention partnerships, education institutions, housing associations, community activities, etc.

The Centre aims to promote the use of a knowledge-based preventive initiative and help to ensure fast and targeted involvement in cases where there is a risk of radicalisation. The Centre offers advice on the development of action plans for prevention of extremism, guidance for professionals on possible ways of dealing with signs of concern, and skills enhancement courses, frequently in cooperation with other stakeholders. The Centre is also implementing a series of method development projects and offers specific tools such as mentors, parental coaches and young discussion instigators.

The Centre is part of the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration under the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration

Find out more about the Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism at stopekstremisme.dk

Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism

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