Criminogenic factors are the most important risk factors for cognitive and behavioural radicalization

This systematic review and meta-analysis examines risk and protective factors for radicalization in democratic countries. The review includes 127 studies, half of which were published from 2018-2020. Among 101 risk and protective factors analysed, the most significant factors are those known to be related to criminal attitudes and behaviours, and social-psychological factors.

What is the aim of this review?
This Campbell systematic review examines putative risk and protective factors (correlates) of radical attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (including terrorism) in democratic countries. The review examines 101 factors, derived from over 1,300 effect sizes extracted from 127 studies.

Risk and protective factors, which increase or decrease the likelihood of these radicalization outcomes, are used in risk assessment and counter-radicalization interventions. However, in practice, the selection of factors is often not evidence-based. As a result, policies and practices are unlikely to be as effective as they could be, and can even increase stigmatization of certain communities, thereby increasing the risk of radicalization.

This systematic review supports the development of more evidence-based approaches by identifying the relative magnitude of the effects for a large number of factors.

Figure 1: Distribution of factors identified across outcomes according to effect size category

The review identifies 101 individual-level factors for radical attitudes, 45 for radical intentions, and 33 for radical behaviours.
What are the putative risk and protective factors for radicalization and what are the relative magnitudes of their effects?

The review identifies 101 individual-level factors for radical attitudes, 45 for radical intentions, and 33 for radical behaviours. The factors can be grouped into five domains:

1) Socio-demographic and background factors,
2) Psychological and personality trait factors,
3) Attitudinal and subjective belief related factors,
4) Experiential factors, and
5) Criminogenic and criminotrophic, factors known for fostering or protecting against a range of deviant outcomes, both cognitive and behavioural.

A small number of factors have moderate (r=.30-.49), or large estimates (r=.50-.63), while the majority of the factors have small-very small relationships with radicalization outcomes. Across all outcomes, key socio-demographic factors tend to have the smallest estimates, with increasingly larger estimates for experiential and attitudinal factors, and criminogenic and psychological factors (See Figure 1).

Differences in estimates by geographic region and ideology

For the outcome of radical attitudes, the estimate for Moral neutralizations was largest for US-based samples. For radical intentions, the estimates for Personal self-esteem and Commitment to a cause were largest in Europe-based samples. With regard to radical behaviours, the estimate for Unemployment was significantly larger for Europe-based samples.

For the most part, there were no significant differences found in the size of the estimates for factors across ideological strains. However, differences were found for seven factors for radical attitudes, six for radical intentions, and three for radical behaviours. The findings are summarized in the below figure which highlights for which ideology significantly larger estimates were found for a given factor (See Figure 2).

What do the findings of the review mean?

Some of the factors most central to risk assessment and counter-radicalization interventions actually have relatively small relationships with radicalization outcomes. Conversely, factors known to be associated with ordinary criminal outcomes have the largest relationships. These findings suggest the need for moving towards weighted risk assessment instruments, and alternative interventions.

How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies up to March 2020.

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About this summary


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