**When Extremists Become Violent: Examining the Association Between Social Control, Social Learning, and Engagement in Violent Extremism**

Author(s): Michael H. Becker

Summary by: Austin Barber, University of Arkansas

**Summary**

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between social control and social learning variables on involvement in violent vs. non-violent extremism. Past research has dictated that despite media attention on individual events, acts of violent extremism are rare, and even among members of extremist organizations the majority are not involved in violence. The author defines extremism as a criminal act to achieve a political, social, economic, religious, or other ideological goal. Additionally, violent extremism is a specific subset where criminal behavior is intended to result in casualties. The study aims to contribute to past research by exploring how social control and social learning frameworks describe involvement in violent extremism. To do so, the following hypotheses emerge:

1. Indicators of stronger informal social control will be negatively related to violent extremism as compared to non-violent extremism.
2. Indicators of the social learning of violence will be positively related to violent extremism, as compared to non-violent extremism.

**Methods**

Using data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PRIUS) database, the author investigates the hypotheses through a series of logistical regressions. The study includes 1,757 participants representing individuals involved in Far Right, Far Left, Islamist, and Single-Issue ideologies who were radicalized in the United States and linked to ideologically motivated crime. The author then evaluates the influence of social control and social learning by applying variables associated with each theory. For social control, participants were labeled between eleven variables, including Abuse Child, Married/Divorced, Close Family, Work History, Unstructured Time, Student, Military, Aspirations, Anger, and Beliefs. For social learning, seven indicators were used to include variables representing the constructs of differential association, imitation, differential reinforcement, and definitions. The indicators were, Group Membership, Actively Recruited, Actively Connect, Clique Radicalize, Gang, Beliefs, and Behaviors.

**Results**

Findings reveal that among radicalized individuals, weaker social control and stronger learning of violence were associated with violent, extremist behavior. The author found a significant relationship between social control and violent behavior through five indicators: Married, Work History, Unstructured Time, Aspirations, and Radical Beliefs. Additionally, four indicators of social learning were found to be significantly associated with violent behavior, which included Actively Recruited, Clique Radicalize, Gang, and Behaviors. The reasoning behind these findings stem from past experiences and social institutions either pushing individuals towards violent extremism or pulling them from jeopardizing their futures.

**Implications**

The findings from the study suggest that there remains much to learn from applying criminological theory to violent extremism. However, due to a need for empirical work on violent extremism among radicalized individuals, this study provides a valuable contribution to developing social control and social learning frameworks. Policymakers and law enforcement officials alike can use the information gained from the results to create policies focused on preventing precursors to violent extremism. Additionally, researchers can further understand what pushes extremists to commit violence for their cause through a theoretically integrated approached.

Becker, M. H. (2019). When extremists become violent: Examining the association between social control, social learning, and engagement in

violent extremism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-21. doi: 10.1080/1057610x.2019.1626093