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Disengaging from Armed Groups and Desisting from Conflict Activities: Drawing Lessons Learned from Criminology

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This Report and the research that supported it were undertaken as part of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Executive Summary

This report offers a comparative analysis of the literature on exiting criminal groups and desisting from criminal offending and that on trajectories out of armed groups and the cessation of conflict-related activities. The report highlights that journeys out of both types of groups are gradual and complex, influenced by a combination of micro, meso, and macro-level factors, including upbringing, parental involvement, coercion, socio-economic grievances, aspirations of belonging, and the impact of societal and environmental factors. The literature examined also reveals the significant psychological impacts of group membership, such as the normalization of violence, which can impact desistance. Further, the analysis underscores how access to education, employment, and social ties outside of these groups significantly aids individuals in their desistance and reintegration efforts. Conversely, barriers such as stigma and limited opportunities beyond the group pose significant hindrances. The report notes the central role social bonds and identity transformation play in the desistance process, pointing to the necessity of supportive relationships and a positive self-concept for successful exit. The report also examines the evidence on the importance of voluntary participation in exit and reintegration programs, which is correlated with more sustainable and positive transitions, calling into question the utility of coercive or punitive measures. Overall, the report highlights the value of drawing from the sizeable criminology literature and the lessons learned from criminal group disengagement and desistance efforts, for practitioners working to promote disengagement from, and reintegration after association with, armed groups. Regardless of how non-state groups are characterized, evidence points to the value of tailored interventions that address intergroup dynamics, adopt a multi-faceted approach to support that includes community engagement, and are sensitive to cultural and gender-specific needs.

Background

About MEAC

Why and how do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining why and how individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.

About this Series

This MEAC report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses of their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report seeks to glean insights from the existing body of research on individual disengagement from criminal organizations and eventual desistance[1] from criminal activities in order to inform the study of individuals exiting armed groups and ceasing participation in political violence. There is an extensive body of criminological literature on the subject,[2] which given the many similarities in recruitment tactics, internal group dynamics, and the psychological aspect of disengagement across both types of groups, offers a distinctive lens for examining connections between the processes of leaving criminal organizations and exiting armed groups (a subject that has not enjoyed as long a history of study). The report will highlight

[1] The term desistance has evolved in meaning over time but generally refers to the process in which someone with a prior pattern of criminal offending gradually abstains from criminal behaviour over an extended period. See, Michael Rocque, "But What Does It Mean? Defining, Measuring, and Analyzing Desistance from Crime in Criminal Justice," *Desistance from Crime: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2021).
[2] John H. Laub, and Robert J. Sampson. "Understanding desistance from crime." *Crime and Justice* Vol 28 (2001); Fergus McNeill. "A desistance paradigm for offender management." *Criminology & Criminal Justice* Vol 6, no. 1 (2006); Beth Weaver, "Understanding desistance: A critical review of theories of desistance." *Psychology, Crime & Law*, Vol 25, no. 6 (2019); Lila Kazemian, "Pathways to Desistance from Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice," in *Desistance from Crime: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2021).

key findings and points of convergence from academic literature and the design of policy interventions on desistance from criminal behaviour that is relevant to understanding the process of disengaging from armed groups and ending political violence.

Introduction

The study of how and why individuals exit armed groups is a subject that has increasingly captured the interest of scholars and policymakers alike. Despite significant scholarly attention and decades of programming, there remains a dearth of robust long-term studies to fully comprehend what factors can influence a complete and sustained transition away from armed groups.

Some scholars have posited that membership in armed groups bears similarities to the involvement in traditional criminal groups, including membership in gangs or other types of organized crime.[3] Beyond membership, parallels between factors that influence individuals towards or away from both types of groups, as well as the internal dynamics and processes within them, further highlight the potential for a meaningful comparative analysis between these two domains. Some of the similarities in the paths to involvement and disengagement from criminal and armed groups suggest there is promise in integrating a criminological perspective into the study of trajectories into and out of armed groups.

Motives and Methods: Armed vs. Criminal Groups

Historically, the analytical separation between armed groups and criminal organizations has been stark, predicated on the assumption that their divergent motives (and at times, methods) precluded meaningful comparisons. This perspective has long influenced why criminological insights were not traditionally drawn upon to understand the dynamics of non-state armed groups. Those armed actors classified as non-state armed groups (NSAGs) were thought to primarily pursue political or ideological goals, seeking to challenge state authority or effect social change through military-style operations and control of territories.[4] NSAGs encompass a diverse array of entities, including those labelled as insurgents, rebels, militias, or even

[3] Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, "Introduction: The Challenge of Non-State Armed Groups", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30, No.2 (2009); Peter Haldén, "Organized armed groups as ruling organizations." *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol 44, no. 4 (2018).
[4] For a thorough explanation, refer to the International Committee of the Red Cross, "Armed Group." Accessed 08 August 2023.

terrorist groups.[5] Examples of NSAGs include groups like the FARC dissidents in Colombia, Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Criminal groups, on the other hand, are seen as primarily engaged in unlawful activities aimed at generating profit, such as drug trafficking, extortion, and money laundering, and can include organized crime syndicates, gangs, and other entities engaged in such activities. For example, the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico and the 'Ndrangheta in Italy are prominent criminal organizations known for their extensive involvement in illicit activities including narcotics trafficking, extortion, and arms trafficking. While there is increased recognition that violent groups are not so easily characterized as either inherently political or criminal, and a growing body of literature that examines politically-driven armed groups involved in financially-driven criminal activity[6] and criminal organizations with political ideologies,[7] this report preserves the historical divide between the two fields to reflect traditional conceptions of the distinctions between violent groups and facilitate analytical comparison.

Even in their 'classic' form, criminal groups and armed groups often share several crucial traits and exhibit some overlapping characteristics related to underlying group processes, methods of operation, and dynamics. Many criminal and armed groups are hierarchically structured and use violence as a means to achieve objectives and maintain control over their members and other populations.[8] Both types of groups may influence local populations through coercion or the provision of services and may employ similar recruitment strategies targeting vulnerable individuals with promises of protection or financial gain. Finally, both groups may also engage in similar tactics such as extortion, kidnapping, and assassinations, among others, and exert territorial control to fund their operations or assert their dominance in a particular area. Therefore, while historically thought to differ in primary motivations (an assumption that feels increasingly dated), the operational parallels of these groups are significant and worthy of

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[5] While all rebel and insurgent groups would qualify as armed groups, not all terrorist groups would. Small underground cells that engage in terrorist violence (not insurgency) and who do not control territory would not meet the metric of an armed group. For example, the ICRC interprets international law as defining an "organized armed group" as "the armed wing of a non-state party to a non-international armed conflict, and may be comprised of either:

a. dissident armed forces (for example, breakaway parts of state armed forces); or
b. other organized armed groups which recruit their members primarily from the civilian population but have developed a sufficient degree of military organization to conduct hostilities on behalf of a party to the conflict."

This means that the groups in question need to be party to a conflict. A small revolutionary terrorist cell in a peaceful country would thus not meet the metric of armed groups (e.g., the Red Army Faction). This is not always so clear cut, however, as the metric, process, and authority to classify violence as constituting an "armed conflict" is debated. It is important to note that criminology has often included the study of certain terrorist groups. Criminological findings related to terrorist groups have not been included in this review to as avoid circular reasoning and overlap.

[6] There have been instances of armed groups engaging in typical criminal activities to generate funds to finance their political activities. See, for example, Fawaz A. Gerges. *ISIS: A History* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2016); James A., Piazza and Scott Piazza. "Crime pays: Terrorist group engagement in crime and survival." *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol 32, no. 4 (2020).

[7] Nicholas Barnes, "Criminal politics: An integrated approach to the study of organized crime, politics, and violence." *Perspectives on Politics,* Vol 15, no. 4 (2017); James F Short Jr and John Moland, "Politics and youth gangs: A follow- up study." *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol 17, no. 2 (1976).

[8] Reed M Wood, "Rebel capability and strategic violence against civilians." *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol 47, no. 5 (2010).

further exploration (particularly with regard to internal group dynamics and factors that influence recruitment and desistance).

Moreover, the rise of hybrid groups which are involved in both political violence and organized crime, and deeply engaged in illicit activities for fundraising purposes, blurs the traditional line between armed and criminal organizations even further.[9] This phenomenon illustrates the complex "crime-conflict nexus" observed in several "contemporary conflicts raging in Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Iraq [...] Yet, our knowledge of the extent and nature (strategic or opportunistic) of this relationship and the mechanisms that support this collaboration remains weak."[10] Indeed, in some instances, the extent of certain groups' economic operations makes it difficult to determine whether ideological or financial motivations drive their actions. Theories surrounding the nexus interactions, also look at how armed groups collaborate with organized criminal groups to fulfil specific needs, such as obtaining forged documents or laundering money. Therefore, this nexus fosters a *symbiotic relationship* characterized by mutual benefit or dependence between armed groups and criminal groups.[11] This operational convergence and emerging nexus, therefore, underscores the value of cross-learning between the fields of criminology and social science studies of armed groups (as well as the necessity of re-evaluating existing frameworks for understanding armed actors).

This report will examine the similarities and differences in recruitment, social dynamics, and operational strategies across criminal and armed groups. This is followed by an analysis of identity formation and violence within these different types of groups, providing a comparative look at the psychological impacts of membership/association. The focus then shifts to the factors contributing to desistance from both criminal and armed groups, centering on the process of disengagement, the influence of social bonds, and the role of external opportunities. The final section of the report assesses various interventions designed to facilitate exits from different types of groups, leveraging insights from existing research and practical experiences in the fields of crime desistance and disengagement to support interventions for armed group disengagement and reintegration efforts.

[9] Moritz Schuberth, "A transformation from political to criminal violence? Politics, organized crime and the shifting functions of Haiti's urban armed groups," *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol 15, no 2 (2015)
[10] John de Boer and Louise Bosetti, "The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence" *Occasional Paper 5* (United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2015), p.2
[11] UNODC, "Theoretical frameworks on the linkages between organized crime and terrorism," *Module 16: Linkages between Organized Crime and Terrorism*. Last Accessed 22 February 2024.

Factors that Influence Involvement in Criminal and Armed Groups

Understanding the factors that lead individuals to engage with violent non-state groups is as crucial as understanding the factors that contribute to their exit. Recruitment into both armed and criminal organizations is influenced by an array of personal, communal/familial, and structural factors. Despite the distinct contexts and nature of these groups, recruitment is consistently shaped by social, economic, psychological, and cultural elements. The following section will, therefore, delve into the range of factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels that influence individual decisions to become involved with criminal groups and then compare it to the literature on the factors that impact armed group association, including MEAC's original research on the subject. At the micro level, the report will examine personal characteristics and individual circumstances, such as family dynamics and upbringing, as well as instances of abductions and coerced recruitment. The meso-level analysis will focus on community and network-based influences, including socio-economic grievances, aspirations of belonging, and community solidary and group preservation. Finally, the macro-level analysis considers broader societal factors, such as economic conditions, political instability, and state-level policies, which create environments that can either facilitate or deter involvement in these groups. Ultimately, the relevance of the following comparative analysis lies in its capacity to inform more nuanced and proactive responses to the challenges posed by criminal and armed groups alike.

Upbringing and Parental Involvement

Criminological research has extensively documented the influence of upbringing and parental involvement in shaping an individual's propensity for criminal behaviour. Key risk factors identified include neglect[12], exposure to violence,[13] harsh discipline,[14] poor parental

[12] Daniel Maughan and Simon C. Moore. "Dimensions of Child Neglect: An Exploration of Parental Neglect and Its Relationship with Delinquency," *Child Welfare*, Vol. 89, no. 4 (2010).
[13] Lucy Fitton, Rongquin Yu, and Seena Fazel, "Childhood maltreatment and violent outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies," *Trauma Violence Abuse*, Vol 21, no. 4 (2018).
[14] Tamara L Taillieu and Douglas A Brownridge, "The Impact of Aggressive Parental Discipline Experienced in Childhood on Externalizing Problem Behaviour in Early Adulthood," *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, Vol 8, no. 4 (2015)

supervision,[15] having parents with criminal backgrounds,[16] and conflict between parents.[17] Such environments can lead to a continuation of criminal activities into adolescence and adulthood.[18] Additionally, the presence of family members in criminal activities has been observed to foster a cultural norm, where involvement in criminality not just impact *current* family gang memberships but also *multi-generational gang affiliations*,[19] making it difficult for younger members to break free from this cycle.

Comparatively, in the case of armed groups, the family's role is similarly impactful. Children of parents who are members of armed groups are often more likely to follow in their footsteps, even if they themselves do not subscribe to the ideologies of the group.[20] This continuity suggests that the association of parents and family members can create a cultural norm, making it more challenging for younger members to break away from this cycle of involvement. Therefore, the role of family dynamics in shaping an individual's propensity toward joining either type of group remains a commonality between the two. Therefore, interventions aimed at preventing the involvement of individuals with armed or criminal groups must consider the importance of family dynamics and seek to address underlying issues within the family structure as well as addressing the perceived or real grievances that pushed the family members into their own involvement.

Coerced Involvement

Coercion is a pivotal factor in the recruitment and sustained involvement of individuals in criminal groups. This phenomenon, characterized by various forms of pressure or force, can act as a pathway for people, often vulnerable or marginalized, to become entangled in activities they might not have voluntarily chosen. In the context of criminal groups, coercion often manifests through threats of force, manipulation, or exploitation of individuals' circumstances,

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[15] India M.L. Flanagan, Katherine M. Auty, and David P. Farrington, "Parental supervision and later offending: A systematic review of longitudinal studies," *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, Vol 47 (2019).
[16] Sara Wakefield, and Rovert J Apel, "Criminological perspectives on parental incarceration." In Christopher Wildeman, Anna R. Haskins, and Julie Poehlmann-Tynan (Eds.), *When parents are incarcerated: Interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children,* (American Psychological Association 2018); Frederik Sivertsson, Christoffer Carlsson and Andreas Hoherz, "Is There a Long-Term Criminogenic Effect of the Exposure to a Paternal Conviction During Upbringing? An Analysis of Full Siblings Using Swedish Register Data," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol 39 (2023).
[17] Ryan C Meldrum, George M Connolly, Jamie Flexon, and Rob T Guerette, "Parental Low Self-Control, Family Environments, and Juvenile Delinquency," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol 60, no.14 (2016).
[18] David P. Farrington, "Childhood risk factors for criminal career duration: Comparisons with prevalence, onset, frequency and recidivism," *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, Vol 30, no. 4 (2020).
[19] David P Farrington, Jeremy W Coid, Joseph Murray, "Family factors in the intergenerational transmission of offending," *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, Vol 19 (2009); Scott Decker and David Curry, "Addressing Key Features of Gang Membership: Measuring the Involvement of Young Members," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 28, no. 6 (2000); Jason Kissner and David Pyrooz, "Self-Control, Differential Association, and Gang Membership: A Theoretical and Empirical Extension of the Literature," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 37, no. 5 (2009)
[20] Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin," *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

such as economic hardship or social isolation. The literature highlights that individuals, particularly youth, can be pressured to join criminal gangs as a means of protection[21] and for a sense of belonging.[22] These scenarios are especially prevalent in areas with high rates of crime and limited state presence, where gangs may exert significant influence.[23] For instance, studies have shown that in some urban settings, gangs may present themselves as a source of safety and belonging, coercing young people to join under the guise of security and self-preservation.[24] Once involved, individuals may find themselves trapped in a complex web of dependency and loyalty to the gang, making it challenging to disengage.

When comparing this to the involvement in armed groups, similar mechanisms of coercion can be identified, albeit with distinct nuances. Armed groups also frequently employ coercion, ranging from overt forced recruitment and abductions to insidious forms of persuasion. In areas with longstanding conflicts, for instance, joining an armed group can sometimes be seen as the only viable option for survival, especially in areas where state authority is weak or absent.[25] In the case of both criminal and armed groups, the coercion stems from a combination of external pressures and the exploitation of individual vulnerabilities. However, the pressures exerted by armed groups are typically framed within broader socio-political contexts and survival imperatives in conflict settings, contrasting with the more immediate personal safety and social belonging concerns leveraged by criminal groups. Despite these differences, a shared consequence in both contexts is the creation of bonds of dependency and loyalty, complicating efforts to leave.

Socio-Economic Grievances and Aspirations of Belonging

In criminology, strain theory explains that people commit crimes when they experience a disconnect between widely held societal goals (e.g., wealth, success) and the means available to individuals to achieve them.[26] This disconnect can lead to frustration and the pursuit of

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[21] Kate O'Brien, Michael Daffern, Chi Meng Chu, and Stuart DM Thomas, "Youth gang affiliation, violence, and criminal activities: A review of motivational, risk, and protective factors," *Aggression and violent behaviour*, Vol 18, no. 4 (2013).
[22] Pamela Lachman, Caterina G. Roman, and Meagan Cahill, "Assessing youth motivations for joining a peer group as risk factors for delinquent and gang behaviour," *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol 11. no. 3 (2013).
[23] Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, "Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life," *Crime & Delinquency,* Vol 39, no. 3 (1993)
[24] John Johnstone, "Recruitment to a Youth Gang," *Youth and Society,* Vol 14, no. 3 (1983)
[25] Krijn Peters, "Group Cohesion and Coercive Recruitment: Young Combatants and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone." in Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, (eds) *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration.* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011).
[26] Robert Agnew, "Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency," *Criminology*, Vol 30 (1992). This work laid the groundwork for the Strain Theory, positing that strain is a central factor in understanding criminal behaviour, where societal pressure and lack of means to achieve culturally accepted goals lead to crime as a form

criminal behaviour as an alternative means to achieve what society values as well as to alleviate the negative emotions or effects, that build from strain through the release of emotions through corrective action such as criminal activity or illicit substance abuse. The pursuit of alternative means to achieve these goals is not just about acquiring material wealth but also involves a search for status and a sense of accomplishment in a society where conventional paths to success seem obstructed or unavailable.

In the context of armed groups, a parallel dynamic is observed. These groups often exploit similar socio-economic grievances and feelings of disenfranchisement. They might offer not just the promise of material rewards but also a sense of status, purpose, and belonging. These offerings can be particularly potent in areas where the state is weak or absent, and where armed groups can present themselves as viable alternatives to state authority.[27] Moreover, armed groups may add layers of ethnic or ideological appeal that are typically absent in most criminal groups, thereby attracting individuals who seek not just material gains but also a sense of participation in a larger, often ideologically driven cause. Thus, for individuals who feel marginalized or face socio-economic barriers, both criminal and armed groups can appear as avenues to achieve those goals that seem unattainable through conventional means. These offers are compelling because they not only provide a chance at the wealth and status that seem out of reach but also a platform to champion perceived noble causes to rectify perceived injustices in society, offering a sense of purpose and belonging. Indeed, such narratives often fulfil a deep-seated human need for community and belonging, which may in itself satisfy a broader societal goal for connection and acceptance for those who feel otherwise disenfranchised or cast out from society.[28]

Victimization and Self-Defence

In contexts that deal with ongoing criminal activities and violence, many individuals find themselves responding by organizing themselves into community security groups, paramilitaries, or vigilante militias to counter criminal groups. The formation of such groups can be driven by prior individual victimization (in the form of unjust taxations, abductions, torture and murder of family members and neighbours), a sense of insecurity, and strong community ties, leading to efforts aimed at collective defence and sometimes, retributory justice.[29] For

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of adaptation. These are primarily focused through the failure to achieve positively valued goals. removal of positive stimuli, or the introduction of negative stimuli. See also, Christine Sellers, "Community, Strain, and Delinquency: A Test of a Multi-Level Model of General Strain Theory," *Western Criminology Review,* Vol 6, no.1 (2005); Robert Agnew, *Pressured Into Crime: An Overview of General Strain Theory* (Oxford University Press USA, 2006).

[27] Scott Gates and Ragnhild Nordås, "Recruitment and Retention in Rebel Groups" *APSA Annual Meeting Paper* (2010).

[28] Eduardo Aguirre-Dávila, "Identity Development of Female Adolescents Belonging to Illegal Armed Groups in Colombia," *Universitas Psychologica*, Vol. 19 (2020)

[29] Jose Sanchez, "Autodefensas: Mexico's Self-Defence Forces," *StMU Research Scholars*, 03 December 2018.

instance, in many Mexican communities, groups have taken to wearing masks, arming themselves with rifles and machetes, guarding their farmlands, and holding informal trials for members of criminal groups accused of offences from cattle theft to murder.[30] In the state of Michoacán, the state's inability in tackling criminal activities led community members to organize themselves into a rural 'police' force known as *autodefensas* to protect themselves from powerful drug cartels and criminal violence.[31] However, sometimes such groups formed to prevent theft or criminal activity might begin to regulate trade and commerce within their territories, often employing the same methods of intimidation they originally stood against. A notable example is the Los Viagras group, which emerged in response to violence from the Knights Templar cartel in Mexico. Over time, they evolved into criminal entities themselves, engaging in activities like drug trafficking, extortion, and territorial disputes.[32] Indeed, many such a*utodefensas* groups have now become regarded as yet another faction in the complex tapestry of organized crime in Mexico.[33]

Much like how communities organize in response to violence and exploitation from criminal groups, they also mobilize to counteract armed groups. In the context of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, for instance, several community self-defence groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Yan Gora, and Hunters and Charmers have emerged to protect themselves and have shifted their mission to contribute to the response against Boko Haram.[34] While it's commonly perceived that joining community security groups is a voluntary action, the actual dynamics are often more nuanced. Individuals may encounter significant social and familial pressure to join these groups. Additionally, enlisting in such groups can be viewed as an essential demonstration of allegiance to the community, while simultaneously serving as a declaration of non-affiliation with any opposing groups.[35] Moreover, as seen in the case of the autodefensas groups in Mexico, certain community security groups in Nigeria, like the CJTF, have also evolved, with their initial defensive posture giving way to offensive operations. This transformation can occur when they arm themselves for protection, engage in forceful

[30] Patricio Asfura-Heim and Ralph Espach, "The Rise of Mexico's Self-Defence Forces: Vigilante Justice South of the Border," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, no. 4 (2013).
[31] Irene Álvarez-Rodríguez, Denisse Román-Burgos, and Sasha Jesperson, "Armed legitimacy in Mexico: Self-defence groups against criminal violence," in *Rural Crime Prevention* (Routledge, 2020); Al Jazeera, "Mexico vigilantes battle cartels," 15 January 2014.
[32] Mexico News Daily, "Los Viagras: a former self-defence force battles the Jalisco cartel over Michoacán," 9 August 2019.
[33] Luis Chaparro, "He Started an Armed Revolt Against the Cartels. His Murder Could be the End of It," *VICE*, 10 August 2023.
[34] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report 18* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
[35] Ibid

recruitment, and even commit acts of violence and human rights abuses[36], ironically mirroring the actions of the armed groups they originally sought to deter.

Although individuals organize into self-defence groups in direct response to the ongoing violence and instability caused by armed or criminal groups in their region, as noted, there have been instances where such community groups undergo transformations that align them more closely with the entities they were created to oppose. Indeed, it is not uncommon for such groups to gradually assume roles that exert control over local economies and governance structures and become instruments of power consolidation and coercion. This shift underscores a critical aspect of individual involvement in self-defence groups: initially joining to counter criminal or armed group threats, many individuals remain with these groups as they evolve, unable to leave even as the groups' activities and purposes change. By understanding the reasons and methods behind the formation and functioning of these community security groups, we can gain a fuller picture of the security landscape in areas affected by criminal or armed group activity.

Societal and Environmental Factors

In the criminology literature, social disorganization theory[37] posits that a person's environment plays a crucial role in the likelihood of them engaging in deviant behaviours. Indeed, high crime rates are often observed in areas with socio-economic disadvantages, a breakdown in social institutions, and strained community relationships. In communities where the state and institutions are missing, criminal groups can thrive, as they often fill voids in social order and offer a sense of belonging and security to individuals in unstable neighbourhoods. The susceptibility of individuals to the influence of criminal groups in these contexts is increased due to the lack of stable social structures and opportunities, making criminal groups appear as viable sources of order and community.[38]

Similarly, armed groups often thrive in areas where there is no state or the state is weak and where the social fabric is damaged, whether by political instability, conflict, or economic deprivation. In these environments, armed groups not only engage in conflict but may also provide essential services, particularly security or dispute resolution, and a perverse sense of

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[36] International Crisis Group, "Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity," *Africa Report* 308 (2022). "Some CJTF forces have been implicated in civilian harm and human rights abuses, in a context where they are not held accountable. They are reported to have become part of the local war economy, participating in criminal networks, while acting as a local police force."
[37] Paul Bellair, "Social Disorganization Theory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Robert J. Sampson, and Groves W. Byron, "Community structure and crime: Testing social-disorganization theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 94, no. 4 (1989).
[38] Solomin Kobrin, "The conflict of values in delinquency areas," *American Sociological Review*, Vol 16, no. 5 (1951).

community and belonging in disorganized environments.[39] Therefore, much like criminal groups, armed groups also tend to flourish in areas marked by social disorganization, offering alternative structures of order and community where state mechanisms are weak or absent, ingratiating themselves with the local population by offering social support and services the state can't or won't provide.

Cumulative Risk

In the domain of criminology literature, the concept of cumulative risk is a helpful frame for thinking about the likelihood of an individual joining a criminal group. Research suggests that while the influence of individual risk factors may be relatively small, the combined impact of multiple risk factors can render individuals more vulnerable to involvement with criminal groups.[40] For instance, studies indicate that individuals associated with criminal entities like gangs tend to exhibit a higher number of risk factors compared to non-affiliated criminal offenders.[41] The risks accumulated can include a variety of factors such as socio-economic challenges, exposure to violence, and problematic family dynamics. In addition to criminal association, the accumulation of risk factors can also impact everything from I.Q. to mental health and academic ability, and involvement in violent behaviour.[42]

Although these studies do not explicitly examine the impact of cumulative risk on armed group membership, the concept of risk accumulation has been recognized as a potentially valuable approach for predicting the likelihood of involvement with armed groups and the use of political violence.[43] The factors contributing to this risk may include, but are not limited to, political instability, economic deprivation, and exposure to conflict and violence. While the specific risk factors might differ between criminal groups and armed groups, the principle that a higher accumulation of risk factors increases the likelihood of involvement holds true. This underscores the need for comprehensive intervention strategies that address the multitude of risk factors influencing individuals.

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[39] Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016).
[40] Michael Rutter, "Protective Factors in Children's Responses to Stress and Disadvantage," in Michael W. Kent and Jon E. Rolf, (eds.), *Primary Prevention in Psychopathology*, Vol 8 (1979); Terrance Thornberry, *Developmental theories of crime and delinquency: Advances in criminological theory* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction, 2004)
[41] Finn-Aage Esbensen, Dana Peterson, Terrance J. Taylor, and Adrienne Freng, "Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors for Violent Offending and Gang Membership," *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (2009).
[42] Jianghong Liu, "Early Health Risk Factors for Violence: Conceptualization, Evidence, and Implications," *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, Vol 16, no. 1 (2011).
[43] Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

Identity Formation and Violence within Criminal and Armed Groups

When examining involvement in criminal and armed groups, it becomes evident that a myriad of possibly compounding factors —ranging from upbringing and parental involvement, the pressures of coerced involvement, the entanglements of socio-economic grievances, to the deep-seated aspirations of belonging, and the defensive responses to victimization— can similarly influence involvement even when the groups and contexts are different. The following section examines the time spent within these groups and how that experience influences behaviour and identity. Such an examination is important for understanding how individuals eventually step away from criminal behaviour or political violence, which is crucial for interventions meant to promote disengagement and desistance.

The Prosocial Motivations Behind Antisocial Action

In criminology, while a significant body of research has connected the formation of a criminal identity to a rise in antisocial behaviour and criminal acts, this does not fully encompass the spectrum of factors influencing such behaviour. [44] There is an underexplored area concerning the prosocial motivations that lead individuals to join criminal gangs. Such motivations include a desire for belonging and a sense of community, which are often overlooked drivers behind the decision to engage with criminal organizations.[45] For individuals who lack a sense of belonging or occupy a low social status in their communities, joining a criminal group and engaging in criminal acts can serve as a means of accruing social capital within the group while simultaneously reinforcing their group affiliation.[46] Behaviour that outsiders might consider 'antisocial' could actually be seen as 'prosocial' by peers within the group, and could be a means of demonstrating allegiance, strengthening one's position, or asserting one's identity within the group.[47] Therefore, often, individuals become part of criminal organizations and engage in criminal acts not due to an inherent inclination toward anti-social behaviour, but

[44] Alain Cohn, Michel André Maréchal, and Thomas Noll, "Bad boys: How criminal identity salience affects rule violation," *The Review of Economic Studies* Vol 82, no. 4 (2015).
[45] John Hitchcock, "Adolescent gang participation: Psychological perspectives," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, Vol 16 (2001).
[46] Teresa Koloma Beck, "The Eye of the Beholder: Violence as a Social Process," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol 5, no.2 (2011).
[47] For examples of subcultures abiding by "antisocial" actions perceived as a prosocial norm, see Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The culture of the Gang* (1995); Walter B Miller, "Lower class culture as a generating milieu of gang delinquency," *Journal of Social Issues,* Vol 14, no. 3 (1958).

rather because they are motivated by unmet prosocial needs and a search for positive social connections.[48]

Similar assumptions regarding antisocial behaviour have been extended to armed groups, particularly those listed as terrorist organizations.[49] However, even acts of violence against civilians within these groups may be motivated by prosocial intentions. These groups typically coalesce around individuals who share a sense of frustration and sometimes are in direct opposition to society. Although an assumption of anti-social motivations is often applied to involvement in armed groups, in reality, individuals are frequently propelled by prosocial motivations towards a specific subset of society.[50] The disconnect in research arises when the term 'prosocial' is exclusively associated with broader positive societal behaviours, failing to recognize that prosocial actions can also be directed towards insular factions.[51] Acknowledging pro-social motivations, therefore, is essential to understanding the complex psychological landscape that propels individuals into criminal and armed group affiliations.

Formation of Group Identity and Exercise of Violence

Within criminal groups, the time spent is often characterized by a profound immersion in the group's culture and practices. Members frequently undergo a process of socialization, where norms and values distinct to the group are internalized, reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging. This socialization process can significantly influence an individual's behaviour and attitudes and could weaken barriers to exercising criminal violence. Individuals involved in criminal groups begin to gradually accept unlawful activities as commonplace.[52] This normalization is a psychological outcome of socialization within these groups, where criminal actions are not just tolerated but are often encouraged or required and can become further engrained in disadvantaged regions, creating "feedback loops" of antisocial behaviour and violence.[53] The psychological impact here is characterized by an altered perception of legal norms and a potential erosion of moral boundaries. Criminal groups frequently foster highly social environments where violence is not only a means to an end but also a *social act*, a way to establish and reinforce group bonds and hierarchies and demonstrate allegiance to the

[48] Jeffrey Stevenson Murer "Understanding collective violence: the communicative and performative qualities of violence in acts of belonging," Ilias Bantekas and Emmanouela Mylonaki (Eds)., *Criminological Approaches to International Criminal Law* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; 2014).
[49] Raymond Corrado, "A critique of the mental disorder perspective of political terrorism," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, Vol 4, no. 3-4 (1981).
[50] Arie W Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, and Rohan Gunaratna, "The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization," *Political Psychology,* Vol.35, no.1 (2014)
[51] Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, "Understanding collective violence: the communicative and performative qualities of violence in acts of belonging," In Ilias Bantekas and Emmanouela Mylonaki (eds)., *Criminological Approaches to International Criminal Law*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; 2014).
[52] Jane L Wood, "Understanding gang membership: The significance of group processes," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, Vol 17, no 6 (2014)
[53] Thomas J. Bernard, "Angry aggression among the "truly disadvantaged"," *Criminology*, Vol 28, no. 1 (1990).

group.[54] This dynamic is particularly pronounced in scenarios where group identity is under threat, either from external forces or internal dissent. In such cases, the use of violence can escalate as it becomes a symbol of loyalty and commitment to the group's cause or survival. The choice to engage in violence, therefore, may not always stem from “antisocial” tendencies but rather from a “pro-social” desire to conform to the group's expectations and norms. The longer the involvement, the deeper the integration into the group's social fabric, often leading to an escalation in criminal offences and a further entrenchment of the criminal identity, making the prospect of leaving the group more challenging. [55]

In a similar vein, while engagement with armed groups does not directly imply personal engagement in violent acts, the significance of belonging to such factions or being part of a stigmatized in-group could eventually contribute to the conditions that promote violent behaviour.[56] Violent imaginaries can bind group members together and engaging in political violence can evolve into a way of expressing one's belonging within the group. Moreover, in armed groups, especially those driven by political or ideological motives, there is also often a strong component of indoctrination. Members are systematically subjected to the group's ideology, which can reshape their perceptions and beliefs.[57] This indoctrination can also create a formidable psychological barrier that makes it challenging for individuals to disengage from the group. Consequently, individuals who commit acts of violence may not necessarily be making an independent choice to be "antisocial" or "bad." Instead, they may be responding to social expectations within their specific environments and assuming prosocial roles and identities within their groups. [58]

Overall, while the exercise of violence is a common thread in both criminal and armed groups, its implications for group identity and individual self-perception are nuanced and context dependent. Particularly those operating in conflict zones are exposed to extreme situations, including violence and trauma.[59] This exposure can lead to further normalization of violence and may result in enduring psychological effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder

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[54] Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, “Understanding collective violence: the communicative and performative qualities of violence in acts of belonging,” In Ilias Bantekas and Emmanouela Mylonaki (eds)., *Criminological Approaches to International Criminal Law*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; 2014).
[55] Karine Descormiers and Raymond R. Corrado, "The Right to Belong: Individual Motives and Youth Gang Initiation Rites," *Deviant Behaviour*, Vol 37, no 11 (2016).
[56] Dara K Cohen, “The ties that bind: How armed groups use violence to socialize fighters.” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 54, no 5 (2017).
[57] Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Ideology and armed conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 56, no. 5 (2019).
[58] J. M. Berger. "Extremist construction of identity." How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics,” *ICCT Research Paper April* (2017).
[59] Brandon Kohrt, Mark Jordans, and Wieste A Tol, “Comparison of Mental Health Between Former Child Soldiers and Children Never Conscripted by Armed Groups in Nepal,” *JAMA*, Vol 300, no.6 (2008)

(PTSD).[60] Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies for disengagement and desistance from both types of groups.

Factors Contributing to Desistance from Criminal and Armed Groups

The path to exit is as complex as the reasons that bind individuals to these groups, shaped by their experiences and the identities forged within. The following section will explore some of the criminological findings on the processes of exits from criminal groups, and how they can offer perspectives that can assist in understanding exits from armed groups. In this section, we will look at criminological research on the desistance process, focusing on factors such as social bonds, changes in self-identity, the presence of opportunities and other push and pull factors. We will then translate these factors into the context of armed groups, considering additional complexities like ideological influence and security concerns that emerge in conflict zones.

Before diving into the specific factors that contribute to desistance, it is first crucial to lay a foundation for understanding the broader concepts of desistance and disengagement. The following subsections will first elucidate these concepts, emphasizing their distinct yet interconnected roles in the journey away from criminal and armed group involvement. Subsequently, the discussion will pivot to explore the cessation of violence, a critical aspect of desistance, underscoring its necessity in a successful transition from group involvement to a violence-free life.

Understanding Desistance and Disengagement

The journey to end involvement in criminal or armed activities is multifaceted, encompassing both the physical exit from the group—disengagement—and the more profound shift away from the behaviours associated with that group—desistance. Studies describe criminal desistance as a slow and gradual process by which individuals cease involvement in criminal activities.[61] Disengagement, meanwhile, is understood as a necessary first step, but not sufficient condition for the cessation of criminal behaviour. It marks the point of physical separation but not necessarily the psychological or social emancipation from the group's

[60] Tobias Hecker, Katharin Hermenau, Anna Maedl, Maggie Schauer and Thomas Elbert, “Aggression inoculates against PTSD symptom severity—insights from armed groups in the eastern DR Congo,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, Vol 4, no 1 (2013).
[61] Shawn D. Bushway, Terence P. Thornberry, and Marvin D. Krohn. "Desistance as a developmental process: A comparison of static and dynamic approaches," *Journal of Quantitative Methods in Criminology*, Vol 19 (2003).

influences. While there are instances of quick disengagement, it's important to recognize that desistance represents an ongoing endeavour, characterized by the commitment towards and maintenance of crime-free behaviour in the face of subsequent challenges, rather than an abrupt cessation.[62] Instantaneous disengagement can often indicate a short-term pause in criminal activity rather than a lasting change in criminal identity and behaviour.[63] This perspective is central in criminological thought, as it aligns more closely with the observed trajectories of individuals who have left criminal groups, highlighting that renouncing criminal behaviour is often a sustained effort rather than an immediate halt.

Meanwhile, when it comes to armed groups, there's often an expectation of a singular, definitive break from the group. This 'one and done' perspective, especially prevalent in policy and programmatic responses to armed conflict and political violence, fails to capture the nuanced reality of the transition away from armed groups. It simplifies a process that, as criminology reveals, is usually gradual and requires a significant reshaping of identity and behaviour over time. Therefore, much like desistance from criminal behaviour, the process of exiting armed groups and transitioning away from political violence is a slow, gradual journey.[64] This nuanced understanding underscores that while disengagement is a critical milestone, the true measure of change is desistance, which reflects a person's ongoing commitment to reform and adaptation to a new life. This involves a protracted period of adjustment and the development of new social roles and identities.

Complete Cessation of Violence

Even when individuals disengage from a gang or other type of criminal group, this separation does not automatically translate into the cessation of criminal activities or the renunciation of violence in all its manifestations. Research emphasizes that individuals with a history of engagement in criminal groups often continue to employ other forms of violence, such as interpersonal violence, even after exiting these groups, indicating that full desistance is more difficult to achieve than previously suggested.[65] This might be attributable, at least in part, to what criminology frequently labels as the notion of antisocial justification – sometimes known as “techniques of neutralization” – aiding individuals in criminal groups to rationalize their actions to avoid guilt due to the socialized values of their subgroup that opposes social norms.

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[62] Shadd Maruna, “Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives,” *American Psychological Association* (2001).
[63] Ronald V. Clarke and Derek B. Cornish, *Modelling Offenders' Decisions: A Framework for Research and Policy* (Routledge, 2017).
[64] Adrian Cherney and Daniel Koehler, *What Does Sustained Desistance from Violent Extremism Entail: A Proposed Theory of Change and Policy Implications,* (2023).
[65] Wesley G. Jennings, Michael Rocque, Bryanna Hahn Fox, Alex R. Piquero, and David P. Farrington, "Can they recover? An assessment of adult adjustment problems among males in the abstainer, recovery, life-course persistent, and adolescence-limited pathways followed up to age 56 in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development," *Development and Psychopathology,* Vol 28, no. 2 (2016).

This phenomenon not only enables individuals to continue engaging in criminal activities but can, over time, result in the transgression of their own ideas of themselves.[66] The persistence of violence after exiting criminal groups underscores the complex nature of desistance, which is not just about stopping criminal acts but also about a profound transformation needed in how individuals perceive themselves and react to conflicts in their everyday lives.[67] Desistance from criminal behaviour is a slow process that profoundly influences an individual's objectives, norms towards violence, social interactions, and daily life and can continue long after adolescence and young adulthood when individuals are more criminally active.

In the context of armed groups, studies reveal that *appetitive aggression* can function as a defence against trauma-related disorders. That is, combatants often adapt to the harsh and violent environments of armed conflict by developing coping mechanisms to endure adverse conditions. Paradoxically, this adaptation also implies that, upon leaving these groups, individuals may grapple with continued dependency on violence and aggressive behaviour, posing substantial challenges to their reintegration and increasing the risk of re-recruitment.[68] Indeed, research indicates that repeated exposure to violence during time with the group can increase the likelihood of its use as a conflict resolution tool in everyday life due to desensitization and the breakdown of norms prohibiting violence within the group. The transition from a life embedded in political violence to one free of all forms of violence is, therefore, a gradual process that necessitates a reevaluation of personal norms and the development of new, non-violent methods of conflict resolution.

Ultimately, when considering the sustainability and quality of transition from both criminal and armed groups, it's imperative to broaden our understanding of the cessation of violence. Merely ceasing engagement in criminal or political violence is insufficient, nor is it always permanent; we must also consider the persistence of other forms of violence, including interpersonal and domestic violence, that individuals could continue to employ after exiting the group. Hence, the true measure of a successful transition lies in an individual's ability to abstain from all forms of violence and reframe their identity to delegitimize support for violent acts. [69]

Having established the foundational concepts of desistance, disengagement, and the cessation of violence, the report will now move to a detailed examination of the factors that contribute to the process of desistance from criminal and armed group activities.

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[66] David Matza and Gresham M Sykes, "Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency," *American Sociological Review*, Vol 22. no 6 (1957).
[67] James Densley, *How gangs work: An ethnography of youth violence* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
[68] Tobias Hecker, Katharin Hermenau, Anna Maedl, Maggie Schauer and Thomas Elbert, "Aggression inoculates against PTSD symptom severity—insights from armed groups in the eastern DR Congo," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, Vol 4, no 1 (2013).
[69] MEAC, "*Conflict Exits Assessment Framework*," UNIDIR, Geneva (2023)

Social Bonds

One of the key factors identified by criminological research as contributing to desistance is the influence of social bonds. Social bonds encompass the relationships and connections individuals have with family, peers, and community – both in the group and outside of a criminal group.[70] These bonds can exert both positive and negative influences on an individual's decision to desist from criminal behaviour. Positive social bonds, such as strong family support and friendships, have been found to be powerful motivators for desistance. When individuals have a stable support system that encourages social activities outside the group, they are more likely to distance themselves from criminal behaviour. Family members and friends can, therefore, serve as a source of emotional support, guidance, and motivation for change. Criminologists often emphasize the importance of maintaining or rebuilding these positive social bonds in the desistance process.[71] Moreover, as individuals grow older, they often encounter life milestones such as employment, marriage, or parenthood, which can instigate a shift in priorities away from risky or deviant behaviours.[72] This transition is not just a factor of aging but is also closely linked to the social bonds strengthened through these milestones. This is consistent with the 'age-crime curve' in criminological literature, which posits that individuals tend to engage in the majority of their criminal activities during their youth and naturally phase out of criminal behaviour as they grow older.[73] Conversely, associations with criminal peers or a lack of familial support, can often hinder the desistance process. Peer pressure and the influence of criminal associates can make it challenging for individuals to break free from criminal activities. Furthermore, strained or broken family relationships and instances of existing familial involvement in criminal groups can leave individuals feeling isolated and less motivated to disengage.

In the context of armed groups, individuals often form strong bonds with their comrades, akin to the bonds formed among criminal peers. These bonds can be characterized by a shared sense of purpose, camaraderie, and loyalty. However, when considering exiting armed groups, social bonds are likely key to leaving behind the group and its violent activities. Family members or friends outside the group can serve as a source of support and encouragement to exit. The desire to reunite with family and previous social networks can motivate armed group members to break away from the in-group bonds and transition to civilian life. The decision to leave,

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[70] Originally described in Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York, NY, Free Press, 1987), these commonly refer to types of social relationships characterized by regular and recurring associative interactions.
[71] Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993)
[72] Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, "Life-course desisters? Trajectories of crime among delinquent boys followed to age 70," *Criminology*, Vol 41, no.3 (2003).
[73] Gary Sweeten, David C. Pyrooz, and Alex R. Piquero. "Disengaging from gangs and desistance from crime." *Justice Quarterly,* Vol 30, no. 3 (2013); Kaylene Douglas and Russell G. Smith. "Disengagement from involvement in organised crime: Processes and risks," *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice,* Vol 542 (2018).

however, becomes complex in situations where individuals have children or relatives within the group. Indeed, women in armed groups may face additional gender-specific challenges, particularly if they have children with armed group members. These women may find themselves staying with the group to support and protect their children.[74] The presence of children can, therefore, create a powerful tether to the armed group for mothers who must navigate the intersection of familial responsibilities and armed group dynamics.

Analysing the role of social bonds in both criminal and armed groups reveals striking similarities and differences. In both contexts, positive social bonds outside the group are key factors that encourage individuals to leave and start a new life. The influence of family and friends plays a similar role in both settings, offering emotional support and a pathway to a different life. Although this age-crime curve is not as extensively studied within the context of armed groups, it may still hold relevance given that youth is a common factor in both arenas.[75] A natural phasing out of criminal behaviour as individuals age and their social bonds evolve could also apply to members of armed groups, albeit with some unique challenges specific to the armed group context. Indeed, identity is not static as it evolves with the individual's experiences and can shape their future trajectory, peer associations, and their path towards desistance.[76] However, the decision to leave can be more complicated when family members, particularly children, are involved within the group, as seen in the case of women in armed groups. These complexities suggest that while criminological insights into the role of social bonds provide a valuable framework for understanding desistance in armed groups, there are additional layers of complexity that must be considered in the context of armed conflict.

Lack of Opportunities Outside of Group Affiliation

The presence of opportunities available outside of the group also plays a significant role in the desistance process. External factors, such as access to legitimate employment and educational opportunities can provide individuals with alternatives to the money or community

[74] Sophie Huvé, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, Dr Remadji Hoinathy, Kato Van Broeckhoven with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, "Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice," *MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
[75] There are considerable resources that indicate children and adolescents are uniquely targeted by recruitment to armed groups due to increased risk of socialization, and easier transmission of political or social ideas, particularly in armed groups that use coercion and violence to recruit, train, and maintain discipline. See: Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Socialization and violence: Introduction and framework," *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol 54, no. 5 (2017); Dara Kay Cohen, "The ties that bind: How armed groups use violence to socialize fighters," *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol 54, no. 5 (2017).
[76] Ray Paternoster and Shawn Bushway. "Desistance and the feared self: Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol 99, no.4 (2009).

to be made through criminal activities, often referred to as transitions.[77] On the other hand, barriers such as limited job prospects for those with criminal records, can impede the desistance process. When individuals face few legitimate opportunities for economic and social advancement outside a criminal group, they may be more inclined to continue associating with the group and engaging in criminal activities.

In the case of armed groups too, the lack of accessible and legitimate alternatives plays a pivotal role in sustaining membership. In active conflict settings, access to employment and educational opportunities may be severely limited. Moreover, individuals may perceive armed group membership as the only viable option for survival and self-preservation in environments marked by conflict and economic insecurity. Barriers such as a lack of protection or economic alternatives not controlled by parties to conflict can make it challenging for individuals to envision a future outside of the armed group. Additionally, individuals who contemplate exit may also fear reprisals from the group or retribution by receiving communities, making the process of leaving perilous. The comparison reveals a shared challenge: the necessity of creating viable alternatives and supportive environments for individuals seeking to exit these groups. This highlights the importance of developing comprehensive strategies that not only facilitate exits but also address the broader socio-economic and security-related barriers that individuals face in both criminal and armed group contexts.

Other Push and Pull Factors

While push and pull approaches[78] are often used for explaining recruitment, this lens can also be applied to exits. In. this context of criminal groups, we can envision a gradual maturation that occurs organically or through the accumulation of factors that either push an individual out of the group or pull them away from the group through the enticement of opportunities beyond involvement with the group. Push factors can include physical limitations due to aging or injury, which affects the ability to participate in criminal activities,[79] increased self-control,[80] and increased ability to make more rational and well-considered choices.[81] Pull factors, on the other

[77] Robert J. Sampson, and John H. Laub, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993); Mark Warr, "Life-Course Transitions and Desistance from Crime," *Criminology*, Vol 36, no. 2 (1998).
[78] Caterina G. Roman, Scott H. Decker, and David C. Pyrooz, “Leveraging the pushes and pulls of gang disengagement to improve gang intervention: findings from three multi-site studies and a review of relevant gang programs,” *Journal of Crime and Justice*, Vol 40, no 3 (2017).
[79] Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, *A general theory of crime* (Stanford University Press, 1990).
[80] Beverly Reece Crank and Timothy Brezina, "Self-control, emerging adulthood, and desistance from crime: A partial test of Pratt’s integrated self-control/life-course theory of offending," *Journal of Developmental and Life-course Criminology,* Vol 5 (2019).
[81]Michael Rocque, "The lost concept: The (re) emerging link between maturation and desistance from crime," *Criminology & Criminal Justice,* Vol 15, no. 3 (2015).

hand, revolve around the achievement of life milestones such as marriage, graduation, and steady employment that grant "mature status" to individuals as they exit criminal activity.[82]

In the case of armed groups, push factors that drive an individual out of armed groups can include disillusionment with the group's ideology and frustration over hardships and poor living conditions within the group, resulting in emotions of doubt, shame, and regret over previous actions and involvement.[83] Other practical factors such as exhaustion and aging, mirroring the age-crime curve of criminal desistence, could also play a role in pushing individuals away from armed groups. Pull factors here include similar external opportunities that can draw individuals away from armed groups through the allures of alternative opportunities, including marriage, connections with new peers, desires to have a family, and the promise of rewards or amnesty for ending involvement with armed groups.[84] Some research indicates that push factors play a more dominant role in exits from armed groups while others argue that the presence of social bonds and networks outside the group plays a significant role by providing an opportunity to reflect on the dim realities of membership or by offering a "soft landing" to those who exit.[85]

Changes in Self-Identity

Another critical aspect of desistance explored in criminological research is the role of self-identity and cognitive transformation. Cognitive transformation involves the dissolution of an individual's identification with a criminal group through the strengthening of personal agency that grants opportunities for the development of a different self-identity.[86] Individuals who undergo a process of cognitive transformation, where they redefine their self-identity in a way that is incompatible with criminal behaviour, are more likely to embark on the path of desistance.[87] Those involved in criminal groups oftentimes experience threats to their individual sense of self and may seek to reaffirm existing views and beliefs. If unsuccessful, they may undergo psychological distress and seek answers.[88] This self-discrepancy can lead to a breaking away from the group. Particularly in tough times for the group, members with low levels of identification and, therefore, commitment, are particularly prone to exit and may seek

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[82] Terrie E. Moffit, "Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour: A developmental taxonomy," *Psychological Review*, Vol 100, no.4 (1993).
[83] Sigrid Raets, "Desistance, Disengagement, and Deradicalization: A Cross-Field Comparison," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 68, no 4 (2024)
[84] John Riley and Mary Kate Schneider, "The Disengagement Puzzle: An Examination of the Calculus to Exit a Rebellion," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol 34, no 8 (2022).
[85] Sigrid Raets, "Desistance, Disengagement, and Deradicalization: A Cross-Field Comparison," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 68, no 4 (2024)
[86] Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives* (American Psychological Association, 2000); Peggy C. Giordano, Stephen A. Cernkovich, and Jennifer L. Rudolph. "Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 107, no. 4 (2002).
[87]Gary Sweeten, David C. Pyrooz, and Alex R. Piquero. "Disengaging from gangs and desistance from crime," *Justice Quarterly*, Vol 30, no 3 (2013)
[88] Kira Jade Harris, *Leaving Ideological Social Groups Behind: A Grounded Theory of Psychological Disengagement* (Edith Cowan University, 2015)

alternative membership or identification.[89] Criminal desistance research has shown that individuals who eventually come to see themselves as responsible, law-abiding citizens are more likely to make this conscious decision to leave behind a life of crime. This change in self-identity is often accompanied by a commitment to a different way of life and a desire to distance themselves from their criminal past.

Similar to the process of cognitive transformation from criminal behaviour, changes in self-identity are relevant in the context of armed groups. Individuals who come to question the ideology or violent actions of the group vis a vis their own beliefs and goals may undergo a cognitive transformation that leads them to reconsider their involvement. For some, this shift in self-identity may involve recognizing the harm caused by the group's actions and committing to non-violence. However, ideological disengagement from armed groups can be fraught with complexities. Individuals may face internal resistance from group members or external threats if they decide to disengage. Significant attention should, therefore, be given to providing options for communities to allow for exiting individuals to break free of how others have identified them in a way that reduces their stigma and allows them to reinvent themselves in order to rejoin society.[90]

In conclusion, the desistance process from criminal behaviour provides valuable insights that can be translated into the context of armed groups. An individual's likelihood to disengage from the group and move to a path of desistance is influenced by several factors, including the presence of external support systems and social bonds, alternative opportunities outside of the group, as well as other push and pull factors. Understanding these factors is essential for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working to support individuals who seek to distance themselves from armed groups and political violence.

Assessing the Impact of Programming Options on Desistance

The report will now turn to examine how the design of different program options and policy solutions, aimed at facilitating the transition of individuals leaving armed groups, can draw upon

[89] Diane Terry and Laura Abrams, "Dangers, Diversions, and Decisions: The Process of Criminal Desistance Among Formerly Incarcerated Young Men," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol 61, no 7 (2015).
[90] Jeremy Robert McMullin, "Integration or separation? The stigmatization of ex-combatants after war," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 2 (2013).

the wealth of existing literature, research, and practical experiences in the realms of criminal desistance and disengagement, particularly the work related to street gangs. These insights can provide valuable insights for shaping programs intended to create opportunities for individuals to exit armed groups successfully.[9192]

Incarceration and Punishment

Incarceration and punishment are fundamental components of the criminal justice system, shaping both individual behaviours and societal outcomes. Incarceration has been studied extensively in criminological studies, often revealing mixed or adverse effects on desistance and recidivism rates of recently released individuals.[93] Moreover, mass incarcerations can also have detrimental effects on the communities these individuals were formerly a part of.[94] The criminological perspective highlights that incarceration, without additional support mechanisms, may be insufficient in promoting desistance. It suggests that for incarceration to be effective in reducing recidivism, it needs to be paired with initiatives that facilitate separation from criminal influences and engagement with positive social networks and opportunities. This process must also allow for personal reinvention, where individuals are not solely marked by their past transgressions but are given the space to develop new identities. The capacity for this transformation is heavily dependent on the policies and ethos of the criminal justice system in question. For instance, in some Scandinavian countries like Norway, the criminal justice system is structured around the concept of rehabilitation and societal reintegration, with a focus on the reinvention of one's identity.[95] In contrast, in places with more punitive approaches, such as certain states in the U.S., the stigma of being a criminal can persist post-release due to

[91] An important caveat to note here is that the applicability of the insights discussed here depends on the conditions tied to the context and region where the armed group's involvement occurred and where the desistance process is taking place. Armed group involvement and the availability of reintegration opportunities vary significantly based on the specific context of engagement. For instance, individuals in countries with greater resources are likely to have more opportunities for reintegration, whereas regions grappling with political turmoil, insecurity, ongoing conflict, and potentially hostile governments may present additional challenges. Access to funding also plays a critical role, as some countries may be reliant on intermittent funding from international entities and donors to finance reintegration efforts, making it challenging to sustain the desistance process.

[92] Another important caveat to note is the need for gender-inclusive programme planning. The research on desistance has predominantly focused on male criminal offenders, and this perspective does not always neatly and consistently apply to the experiences of female criminal offenders or women exiting armed groups. Research highlights significant gender-based differences in the dynamics of desistance. For instance, family factors, particularly the presence of children, tend to have a more pronounced impact on the potential for female desistance. Therefore, any program aimed at facilitating exit and reintegration must consider the gendered effects of various factors, including social bonds. Such programming should also be tailored to address the unique economic challenges and reintegration needs faced by women exiting armed groups See, Elanie Rodermond, Candace Kruttschnitt, Anne-Marie Slotboom, and Catrien Bijleveld, "Female desistance: A review of the literature," *European Journal of Criminology,* Vol 13, no. 1 (2016).

[93] Danielle L Biosvert, "Biosocial factors and their influence on desistance," *Desistance From Crime*, Vol 41 (2021); William D. Bales and Alex R. Piquero, "Assessing the impact of imprisonment on recidivism," *Journal of Experimental Criminology,* Vol 8 (2012)

[94] Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

[95] Stål Bjørkly, Pål Hartvig, John Olav Roaldset, and Jay P. Singh, “Norwegian Developments and Perspectives on Violence Risk Assessment,” *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, Vol 41, no. 12 (2014).

factors like public criminal records and the societal perception of ex-offenders, hindering the ability to reforge a new identity separate from past offences.[96]

In the context of exiting armed groups, some studies indicate that incarceration can lead to an increase in the post-release risk of engaging in political violence and greater identification with the group. For instance, incarcerating committed extremists alongside lower-ranking members, who may not share the same level of commitment or could themselves be victims, poses the risk of exposing the latter to violence and ideologies that could perpetuate further violence upon release.[97] The effectiveness of incarceration in facilitating exits from armed groups largely depends on how it is implemented. Therefore, governments can enhance effectiveness by differentiating facilities based on detainees' risk levels and ranks. Those coerced or captured by the group, notably women and children, should ideally be housed separately, given their status as victims rather than perpetrators. Treating them as offenders risks alienation and undermines efforts to deter involvement in such groups. Additionally, excessively harsh conditions hinder prisoner rehabilitation, increasing the likelihood of recidivism.[98] If the approach emphasizes rehabilitation and offers support for identity transformation, as seen in certain criminal justice systems, it may be more successful. However, if it only serves as a punitive measure without addressing the underlying issues or providing opportunities for positive social engagement, its effectiveness in promoting sustainable disengagement from armed groups is likely to be limited. Ultimately, these findings imply that imprisonment alone is insufficient to promote desistance; it must be accompanied by efforts aimed at rehabilitation and reintegration, including increased separation from the group, with simultaneous engagement with alternative social networks and opportunities, which may not necessarily transpire through confined punishment.

Restorative Justice Programs

Restorative justice programs in response to criminal activities have been recognized for their effectiveness in promoting desistance from crime. These programs, operating as alternatives to traditional punitive measures, aim to address the harm caused by criminal activities by providing an opportunity for those harmed by such acts and those who take responsibility for them to communicate their circumstances and address their respective needs.[99] Restorative justice practices are argued to assist in the healing of society by restructuring punitive measures from those that do not benefit the community (e.g., incarceration) to those that do

[96] Michelle T Boots, “Can Alaska Learn from Norway's 'Radically Humane' Prisons?” *CorrectionsOne*, 11 October 2017.
[97] Ronald Slye and Mark Freeman, “The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism,” *Framework Paper* (United Nations University, May 2018).
[98] Ibid.
[99] Canadian Intergovernmental Conference, “Principles and Guidelines for Restorative Practice in the Criminal Matters,” *Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Responsible for Justice and Public Safety* (2018).

particularly through service (e.g., rebuilding community infrastructure, participation in environmental conservation efforts). For instance, in countries like New Zealand, such restorative justice practices are integrated into the youth justice system, requiring young offenders to directly contribute to the community they've impacted.[100] Particularly for first-time offenders, diversion programmes that are grounded in restorative justice principles offer a chance to take responsibility for their actions beyond the courtroom.[101] These practices facilitate a smoother reintegration into society by minimizing stigmatization that comes from criminal prosecution or imprisonment and can tangibly benefit victims and the community. Indeed, diversion initiatives have demonstrated how communities can benefit from the investment of time and effort of repenting individuals, while also allowing offenders to avoid the stigma of a criminal record and develop more positive reputations through personal involvement in healing the damage inflicted on their community and its members.[102]

In the context of armed conflicts and political transitions, restorative justice and transitional justice have served as complementary yet distinct approaches to addressing the consequences of political violence. Both paradigms converge on foundational principles such as truth-seeking, accountability, reconciliation, conflict resolution, democratic engagement, and a critical stance towards punitive and adversarial justice systems. While restorative justice focuses on healing relationships between individual offenders and victims through dialogue, transitional justice, deals with large-scale historical injustices and human rights abuses, aiming to address broader systemic issues, ensuring accountability and promoting reconciliation on a societal level.[103] It has also been argued that the implementation of restorative justice in environments affected by conflict and widespread violence can be a stepping stone towards transitional justice, enhancing community healing, and fostering reconciliation and accountability.[104] However, transitional justice is also often viewed as inadequate for certain groups, particularly those listed as "terrorists," who are often perceived as deserving harsh punishment. Yet, in conflict settings, individual involvement with such groups varies significantly, ranging from combatant to support roles, and is driven by coercion, survival, and voluntary decisions. This diversity necessitates nuanced approaches to justice and accountability. Broad punitive strategies risk penalizing civilians coerced into interaction with terrorist groups and could fuel new cycles of vengeance and violence, thereby hindering efforts

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[100] Gabrielle Maxwell and Allison Morris, “Youth Justice in New Zealand: Restorative Justice in Practice?,” *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol 62 (2006)

[101] Peter Johnstone, “Emerging developments in juvenile justice: The use of intervention, diversion and rehabilitation to break the cycle and prevent juvenile offending,” *Judicial Review: Selected Conference Papers: Journal of the Judicial Commission of New South Wales,* Vol 12, no.4 (2016).

[102] Adriaan Lanni. "Taking restorative justice seriously," *Buffalo Law Review,* Vol 69 (2021); Gill McIvor, "What is the impact of community service." In Fergus McNeill, Ioan Durnescu, and René Butter, (eds) *Probation: 12 essential questions* (Springer, 2016).

[103] David O'Mahony and Jonathan Doak, “Transitional Justice and Restorative Justice,” *International Criminal Law Review*, Vol 12 (2012).

[104] Wendy Lambourne, “Restorative Justice and Reconciliation: The Missing Link in Transitional Justice,” in Kerry Clamp, *Restorative Justice in Transitional Settings* (Routledge, 2016).

toward stability and conflict resolution.[105] Therefore, implementing restorative and transitional justice approaches in conflict-affected areas involves facilitating communication between former group members and the communities they have affected, helping resolve deep-seated grievances and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for rebuilding communities torn by conflict.[106]

Ultimately, the application of restorative justice principles in both criminal and armed group contexts shows a shift from punitive to rehabilitative approaches that can aid in reducing recidivism by encouraging offenders to understand and rectify the impact of their actions. In the context of armed conflict, transitional and restorative justice approaches should also be integrated into the broader peacebuilding efforts, working in concert with other conflict mitigation and resolution strategies including community reconciliation, reintegration, and DDR[107]. This is particularly important since criminal justice systems in conflict-affected contexts often struggle with the overwhelming caseloads resulting from widespread violations, failing to meet basic legal standards or respect human rights adequately in addressing them.[108]

Healthy Identity Initiatives

Healthy identity initiatives that respond to offending and group association focus on facilitating a cognitive and behavioural shift in individuals, moving them away from their criminal identity. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), for instance, is a widely recognized approach in this context. It helps individuals recognize and challenge the thought patterns associated with their criminal identity.[109] In Liberia, for example, a CBT program demonstrated a significant decrease in criminal, violent, and other antisocial behaviours among "hard-core street youth" who were involved in drugs and crime, living in extreme poverty, and engaged in violence and risky activities. A follow-up evaluation conducted 10 years post-program revealed that these reductions in crime and violence had enduring effects, persisting nearly a decade after the

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[105] Ronald Slye and Mark Freeman, "The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism," *Framework Paper* (United Nations University, May 2018).
[106] Laura Stovel and Marta Valiñas, "Restorative Justice after Mass Violence: Opportunities and Risks for Children and Youth," *Innocenti Working Paper* No. 2010-15. (Florence, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2010).
[107] Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is a process in which members of armed forces, factions, and other previously or currently militarized groups are socially and economically supported to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life. For more information, see: United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), *Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration*. Accessed 22 March 2024.
[108] Nicole Ephgrave, "Women's testimony and collective memory: Lessons from South Africa's TRC and Rwanda's gacaca courts," *European Journal of Women's Studies,* Vol 22, No 2 (2015); Phil Clark, *The Gacaca courts, post-genocide justice and reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice without lawyers* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Bert Ingelaere, "The gacaca courts in Rwanda," In *Traditional justice and reconciliation after violent conflict: learning from African experiences* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2008).
[109] D. A. Andrews, Ivan Zinger, Robert D Hoge, James Bonta, Paul Gendreau, and Francis T Cullen, "Does correctional treatment work? A clinically relevant and psychologically informed meta-analysis," *Criminology*, Vol 28, no 3 (1990); Christopher Blattman, Julian C. Jamison, and Margaret Sheridan, "Reducing Crime and Violence: Experimental Evidence from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in Liberia," *American Economic Review*, Vol 107, no 4 (2017).

program's completion.[110] Another example is the use of narrative therapy, where individuals are encouraged to tell their stories and redefine their life narratives in a way that distances them from their past actions and aligns with their goals for the future.[111] Additionally, educational and vocational training programs can also support identity shifts by equipping individuals with new skills and roles that contribute to a sense of purpose and self-worth, moving them away from their previous group affiliations.

In the case of armed groups too, emerging evidence supports the efficacy of CBT as a means to counteract self-destructive beliefs and specific ideological and psychological patterns, and as a violence reduction strategy. For instance, research conducted in DRC with former child soldiers and other war-affected youth, who participated in group-based, culturally adapted Trauma-Focused CBT sessions, indicated the intervention's success in diminishing posttraumatic stress, psychosocial distress, depression, and anxiety symptoms, alongside notable improvements in prosocial behaviour. Moreover, a three-month follow-up of the intervention group confirmed the sustainability of these treatment gains.[112] Meanwhile, mentorship programs involving former armed group members who have successfully transitioned to civilian life have proven to be useful in providing practical guidance and support.[113] Similarly, narrative therapy is an effective tool for helping individuals from armed groups reconstruct their life stories, distancing themselves from the group's ideology and activities. Education and vocational training also remain crucial for providing former armed group members with new skills and roles, facilitating their integration into society and reducing the appeal of returning to the group. Ultimately, the underlying principle of healthy identity initiatives in both criminal and armed group contexts is the recognition that identity plays a crucial role in sustaining involvement in these groups. The transition away from these groups involves not just physical disengagement but also a profound cognitive and behavioural transformation, enabling individuals to forge a life outside and beyond their former group.

Inclusion of Family and Friends

In addressing criminal behaviour, the inclusion of family and friends is recognized as critical in promoting desistance from offending. The motivation for involvement in criminal groups often

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[110] Christopher Blattman, Sebastian Chaskel, Julian C. Jamison, and Margaret Sheridan, “Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as a Cost-Effective Tool for Sustained Violence Reduction,” *Policy Brief* (Innovation for Poverty Action, 2022).
[111] Emily Pia, “Narrative Therapy and Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol 7, no. 4 (2013).
[112] John McMullen, Paul O'Callaghan, Ciara Shannon, Alastair Black, and John Eakin, “Group trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy with former child soldiers and other war-affected boys in the DR Congo: a randomised controlled trial,” *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry,* Vol 54 (2013).
[113] Sophie Huvé, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, Dr Remadji Hoinathy, Kato Van Broeckhoven with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, "Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice," *MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

stems from a need for belonging and community. Thus, helping individuals recognize the positive aspects that drew them to these groups and refocusing these desires toward constructive social engagement is essential. Inclusion of family and friends, as well as engaging with welcoming communities and mentors, helps create and build alternative social bonds, which are instrumental in reinforcing positive behavioural changes and aiding in the desistance process.

In the context of exits from armed groups, studies have indicated that external influences, such as families, peers, and social networks can influence disengagement.[114] The journey out of an armed group involves not only altering one's social networks and behaviours but also undergoing a profound shift in identity. Developing relationships with non-combatants can help de-normalize violence and influence how ex-combatants perceive themselves, a critical aspect of successful desistance.[115] A key aspect of (re-) building social connections after conflict involvement is also the avoidance of stigmatization, which has been found to be detrimental to desistance and disengagement. Stigmatization hinders the core process of identity transformation, as labelling these individuals as "others" obstructs their psychological and functional reintegration into society.[116] Indeed, successful reintegration is a two-way street that requires not just the individual's willingness to change but also the community's readiness to accept them. This is not just about social acceptance but also about identity. Shifting how an ex-offender or ex-combatants identifies themselves is key, but they also need to be allowed to recreate who they are. Thus, the community must allow them to move beyond how they have been identified. By having the space to re-imagine their identity – and thus how they are identified by others – both former criminal and armed group associates are better positioned to (re-)build social bonds outside their former group.

Unintended Effects of Intervention

In the domain of criminal desistance, the efficacy of interventions yielding positive outcomes hinges significantly on whether participation is voluntary or mandated and underscores the importance of individual agency. Research has shown that mandatory interventions for those involved in criminal activities can lead to unintended and often negative outcomes.[117] The enforcement of forced and punitive measures can reinforce an individual's oppositional beliefs, aggravating their defiance and heightening the sense of an "us versus them" mentality. This

[114] Carla Suarez and Erin Baines, "'Together at the Heart': Familial Relations and the Social Reintegration of Ex-combatants," *International Peacekeeping*, Vol 29, no 1 (2022).
[115] MEAC, "*Conflict Exits Assessment Framework*," UNIDIR, Geneva (2023)
[116] Jeremy Robert McMullin, "Integration or separation? The stigmatization of ex-combatants after war," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 2 (2013).
[117] Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

resentment often results in increased recidivism, as individuals resist changes imposed upon them.

In the case of armed groups, voluntary engagement in DDR programs is recognized as more beneficial, promoting a smoother transition for ex-combatants, fostering a sense of ownership and emphasizing self-motivation and personal choice.[118] Individuals forcibly removed from armed groups and placed into structured programs might perceive these interventions as an extension of the conflict, seeing them as impositions by a rival entity (often the state or international bodies). This perception can hinder the development of a post-conflict identity and obstruct the process of reintegration into civilian life. [119]Even less punitive interventions, like mandatory rehabilitation programs or community service, could undermine the potential for genuine transformation if they fail to respect individual autonomy and foster an environment of mutual respect. In short, emphasizing the autonomy of the individual in the intervention process and allowing for self-motivated participation is key to the success of both criminal desistance and DDR programs. Therefore, the desistance paradigm should place the individual, rather than the intervention at the center.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

The preceding comparative analysis of the literature on exiting armed groups and that on pathways out of criminal organizations and desistence from criminal activity has underscored the similarities between the two processes and the erosion of the distinction between the two "types" of groups. "Criminal" and "political" non-state actors are better understood as existing on a continuum rather than in two distinct categories. As such, there is much to learn from the rich literature on disengagement from criminal groups and desistence from criminal offending that is relevant for planning defector, DDR, and reintegration interventions in armed conflict settings.

One of the most important takeaways from the many decades of criminology research is that disengagement and desistence are not events but processes. As with criminal behaviour and association, transitions away from armed groups and armed conflict are not abrupt, one-time events but gradual, complex undertakings influenced by a myriad of factors. While there may

[118] United Nations, The Integrated Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), "The UN Approach to DDR," *Module 2.10*, p. 20.
[119] Vittor Costa, et al. "One size does not fit all: Exploring the characteristics of exit programmes in Europe," *Journal for Deradicalization,* Vol 28 (2021).

be no political tolerance for gradual transitions – especially when a peace process or ceasefire hangs in the balance, or the group is listed as terrorist – the reality is that such transitions are unlikely to be instantaneous. To be effective, interventions, programming, and policy responses need to recognize this and plan accordingly.

The criminology literature also offers a series of lessons learned on fostering conditions that support a hastened and/or sustained transition away from criminal involvement that have relevance for practitioners and policymakers working to end armed conflict and build peace, including:

1. **Prioritize Personal Agency and Voluntary Participation**: Various interventions aimed at criminal offending and criminal group association have demonstrated the value of personal agency in the desistance process. As laid out in the Integrated DDR Standards, the first principle of DDR is that it is voluntary.[120] In practice, "This principle has become even more important, but contested, in contemporary conflict environments where the participation of some combatants in nationally, locally, or privately supported efforts is arguably involuntary, for example as a result of their capture on the battlefield or they're being forced into a DDR programme under duress."[121] While this similarity in approach already exits, reinforcing (and perhaps reimagining) "voluntariness" in light of the pressures on defector and DDR programmes in ongoing conflict contexts is warranted. Programs that respect individual choice and autonomy are more likely to engender genuine commitment to the process and reduce the likelihood of recidivism into violent behaviour. Even when choice may be curtailed (e.g., when an individual's name is referred on a DDR list by an armed group that has agreed to stand down), there are ways to build in more agency in the process. For example, once part of a defector, DDR, or reintegration programme, having a say in programming activities (e.g., the type of livelihood support) will likely enhance buy-in from participants.

2. **Adopt a Holistic, Individualized Approach:** The evidence on exiting criminal organizations underscores the need for support to be holistic and individualized to address the wide range of factors influencing an individual's decision to leave and their reintegration progress. This includes providing access to mental health support, educational and vocational training, and opportunities for positive social engagement. Tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs and circumstances of each individual can significantly enhance the effectiveness of reintegration efforts. The need for holistic

[120] United Nations, The Integrated Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), "The UN Approach to DDR," *Module 2.10*.
[121] Ibid., p. 20.

interventions that can be both scaled up and provide tailored support to address particular needs has received increased recognition in the DDR and reintegration community. This is apparent in the ongoing revision of the Integrated DDR Standards but moving from guidance to practice will require further and longer-term funding and innovation at the programme design and innovation level.

3. **Emphasize Non-Punitive Approaches:** There is much to be learned from the restorative approaches employed to address gang activity or criminal offending with victimized communities that could be applied to conflict-affected settings. Blanket punitive responses to armed group involvement and conflict engagement are unlikely to satisfy those victimized, may undermine full and successful transitions to civilian life, and fail to deter future violence. As long recognized by transitional justice efforts, an evidence-based and participatory approach to determining a balanced response to redressing violence and promoting peace is necessary. The practical experiences with restorative approaches to dealing with criminal offending offer practitioners working in conflict-affected contexts a range of options and lessons to consider.

4. **Foster Community Reintegration**: Successful desistance from criminal activities is closely tied to the individual's ability to reintegrate into their community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is also true in post-conflict settings. Community engagement initiatives that facilitate the reestablishment of social bonds are key to social and economic reintegration. Efforts to reduce community stigma and promote acceptance are critical in ensuring that individuals do not feel compelled to return to violence as a means of belonging or survival. This has been recognized for many years but has not always translated into the allocation of resources. The evidence documented in the criminology literature again reinforces the value of investing in efforts to mend social ties for ex-armed group associates.

5. **Promote Cognitive and Identity Transformation:** The recognition that desistance from criminal activities and disengagement from criminal groups involve a significant cognitive and identity transformation is relevant for armed conflict settings. Indeed, even more so than criminal groups, armed groups indoctrinate and inculcate associates with a shared identity that can be difficult to shed upon exit. Without transforming how one thinks about themselves, it is unreasonable to expect receiving communities to think about ex-associates differently. Techniques such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, narrative therapy, and mentorship have proven useful in criminal offending/association contexts (and in at least a few cases with ex-combatants) and should be considered for expansion in conflict-affected settings to help ex-associates envision a future beyond their involvement with their former armed group(s).

6. **Manage Expectations**: The gradual nature of desistance highlights the importance of managing political and societal expectations regarding those transitioning. This is an important takeaway for those supporting the reintegration of former armed group members. Policymakers and practitioners must communicate the complexities of the exit process and set realistic timelines for reintegration outcomes. Acknowledging the incremental progress and potential setbacks inherent in the journey toward sustained desistance can help align expectations with empirical realities. This is important not just with recipient communities that accept back ex-associates, but also for ex-associates themselves. As defector, DDR, and reintegration support are often impacted by insecurity, funding fluctuations, and political processes, timelines and support can be greatly impacted. To promote continued defection and effectively transition ex-associates (and prevent spoilers) it is important that there are clear, realistic communications about the type of support those exiting are eligible for, when they will receive it, and how, and what will happen next (especially when they will be able to go home).

7. **Continuously Evaluate and Adapt Programs**: Relatedly, given the dynamic nature of desistance from crime, it has become clear that related interventions must be flexible and responsive to changing needs and circumstances. This is similar to efforts to support transitions out of armed groups to civilian life. In that regard, both criminal and conflict-related interventions can benefit from continuous monitoring and evaluation to identify shifting dynamics and challenges in order to support adjustments to programme design and implementation.

In conclusion, the insights gained from the study of criminal desistance and criminal group disengagement offer valuable guidance for practitioners and policymakers working to mitigate and resolve armed conflict and build peace. The wealth of lessons learned in criminology from decades of studying different interventions to address gang association or promote desistence in offending is extremely relevant to practitioners working to design and implement defection, DDR, and reintegration programming. This report serves as a short introduction to this literature, but further exploration would be useful to promote better-tailored, evidence-based responses to address the complex, multifaceted nature of desistance and reintegration in conflict-affected contexts.

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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