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## Deradicalization and Disengagement: Exit Programs in Norway and Sweden and Addressing Neo-Nazi Extremism<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

Though the study of deradicalization is relatively new, in the last several decades many countries have undertaken the task of building programs within the space to address the growing threat of extremism and radicalization – both from a religious and political perspective. This paper examines the birth of deradicalization programs in Norway and Sweden, which were two of the first – if not the first – countries to create holistic programmatic approaches to tackling disengagement and deradicalization. Both of these programs sprang up in the mid-to late 1990s and were tasked with growing far-right extremist groups. The paper outlines the opportunities and challenges that facet of the program presented and if and how they were able to adjust. Finally, the paper looks at the data collected by each program, specifically on the number of their participants and if they remained separate from radical ideologies to determine if the programs were success and similar programs could be replicated and expect similar successes.

With the resurgence of white power and Neo-Nazi extremism across Europe and the United States, a consideration of the programs developed in Sweden and Norway two decades ago may provide a replicable template for current issues with extremism.

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### Introduction

While the rise of Islamic terrorism receives a significant portion of the attention, Northern Europe has – for decades – dealt with a rising tide of neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, and other white power movements. The threat grew to such an extent in the mid-1990s that there was an understanding by both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that these

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groups and their ideologies were becoming a serious domestic threat. In countries like Norway and Sweden, these ideologies had permeated a substantial portion of the population in the early twentieth century and were not completely eradicated with the defeat of Nazi Germany after World War II. Although many of the groups professing these beliefs were forced underground in the intervening decades, the ideologies still attracted a number of devoted followers. This article will look at the precipitating factors that led to the disengagement and deradicalization programs in Norway in Sweden; the relationship between the programs in both countries, including significant differences between them; and the long-lasting effects of the programs in each country.

Overall, the Exit programs in both Sweden and Norway have similar features, at least partially because they address similar ideologies. However, as Norway's extremist population is very young, their program emphasizes parental involvement and early intervention by professionals in order to present differing life possibilities for these groups, whereas Sweden's older population requires a programmatic structure dependent on proactive engagement from those individuals seeking to disengage and deradicalize. Sweden's program also sets itself apart by its use of – and dependence on – the work of former neo-Nazis themselves to staff the program and coach the individuals who are attempting to leave violent, far-right extremism, which lends the program credibility but also presents challenges. While each program has demonstrated high success rates, more information is needed to determine whether those successes are sustained. Particularly in the case of Sweden, the country's own legal data protections inhibit the ability to determine whether the program should be considered a success. The lack of data in both cases damages the ability to distinguish the features of each program that contribute most to its success, as well as its failures.

## Literature Review

There is general agreement across geographic, demographic, and religious lines that extremism is a significant global issue and has been for several decades. However, there is

less agreement about what should be done to rehabilitate those that have undergone radicalization; what constitutes rehabilitation; and the more general question of whether it is even possible to deradicalize and rehabilitate a former extremist.

While the attention on deradicalization programs, as well as the growth of countries that have adopted such programs are relatively new, the ideas behind them are not, as this paper will detail. One of the first deradicalization study was released in 1988 and focused on individuals who had left and renounced their ties to Neo-Nazism in the United States; however, unlike concerted efforts to institute deradicalization programs, the individuals included in this study had “voluntarily disaffiliated themselves” from their radical groups.<sup>3</sup>

### *Concept of Deradicalization*

When looking at deradicalization as a theory, some scholars are quick to separate the concept of deradicalization from the concept of disengagement because, in their view someone committed to a radical ideology can be disengaged from committing acts in the name of that ideology without being persuaded away or renouncing their beliefs. John Horgan and Kurt Braddock make the argument that deradicalization implies changing at the cognitive level with a “long-lasting change in orientation such that there is *presumably* a reduced risk of re-engaging in terrorist activity” while disengagement can be classified as something as small a change in roles with an organization or movement.<sup>4</sup> However, in an earlier piece of work, Horgan and Braddock were definitive in their refutation that “desistance from terrorism requires a change in attitudes to precede a change in behavior.”<sup>5</sup> However, Kruglanski, Gelfand, and Gunaratna say that in many deradicalization programs, disengagement provides the *backbone* for deradicalization as these programs “stress disengagement from violence and

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<sup>3</sup> James A. Aho, "OUT OF HATE: A SOCIOLOGY OF DEFECTION FROM NEO-NAZISM," *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 11, no. 4 (1988).

<sup>4</sup> John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22 (2010).

<sup>5</sup> John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Assessing the Effectiveness of Current De-Radicalization Initiatives and Identifying Implications for the Development of U.S.-Based Initiatives in Multiple Settings,” College Park: *START* (2009), [https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local\\_attachments/De-radicalization%20Programs%20Final%20Report.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/De-radicalization%20Programs%20Final%20Report.pdf).

alternative methods of redressing the alleged grievance, rather than denying the validity of the grievance.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Deradicalization Programs*

Within the literature focusing on deradicalization, some scholars interchangeably use the terms “disengagement” and “deradicalization,” which for the purposes of this paper do not mean the same things, and when used synonymously can lead to improper conclusions as the authors of “Disengagement from Ideologically-Based and Violent Organizations: A Systemic Review of Literature” point out.<sup>7</sup> Establishing that a subject’s disengagement from a group – by whatever metrics that is judged on – does not mean that they no longer hold a particular belief system, which could lead to their reengagement.

### *Significance Quest Theory and the Development of Deradicalization Programs*

The successful development of deradicalization – and disengagement – programs are built on an understanding of why individuals radicalize in the first place. In the last decade a considerable percentage of scholarship on radicalization, and in turn, deradicalization, has focused on the understanding of the psychology of individuals that have undergone radicalization processes. The “quest for significance” has been identified as a “fundamental human motivation by many psychological theorists” for decades, dating back to Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in the early 1940s.<sup>8</sup> Arie Kruglanski has done significant work around this topic, and his assertions of the concept of a “significance quest” that propels suicidal terrorism form the basis of much of the other theoretical discussions and research in

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<sup>6</sup> Arie Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, and Gunaratna, “Aspects of Deradicalization,” “Aspects of Deradicalization.” *Institute for the Study of Asymmetric Conflict*. 12 January 2011, <http://www.asymmetricconflict.org/articles/aspects-of-deradicalization/>.

<sup>7</sup> Steve Windisch, Pete Simi, Gina Sott Ligon, and Hillary McNeel, “Disengagement from Ideologically-Based and Violent Organizations: A Systemic Review of Literature,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 9 (2017): 4.

<sup>8</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski and Edward Orehek, “The Role of the Quest for Personal Significance in Motivating Terrorism,” In *The Psychology of Social Conflict and Aggression*, edited by Joseph P. Forgas, Arie W. Kruglanski, and Kipling D. Williams, New York: Psychology Press, 2011, 154.

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this field.<sup>9</sup> The significance quest theory “affords an integration of seemingly disparate motivational contexts of suicidal terrorism involving personal traumas, ideological reasons, and social pressures,”<sup>10</sup> that can help to lay the foundation for how to deradicalize an individual. For practical purposes, having a broad theoretical understanding for radicalization allows for the design of deradicalization programs that can address more factors for radicalization than programs that assume a limited cause for radicalization.

### *Program Standards and Ingredients for an Effective Program*

Across scholarship, there is general agreement that a successful deradicalization program hinges on delegitimizing either the group or narrative – sometimes both – to which a terrorist identifies. Koehler also points out the importance of systematically dismantling “the previously learned radical ideology.”<sup>11</sup> Further, as Koehler discusses, the “nature, scope, and structure” of deradicalization programs is largely dependent on a number of different aspects including the target, goals, and standards.<sup>12</sup> Emilio Viano argues that prevention “should be limited and carefully focus on people who are reasonably suspected of intending to commit or directly facilitate violence, or those who are clearly targets of recruitment efforts”.<sup>13</sup>

Determining the effectiveness of a program can be done in a number of different ways and the literature on these accountability tools is often highly subjective. Across countries and cultures there is general agreement amongst researchers that these programs have “no

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<sup>9</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shire Fishman, and Edward Orehek, “Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers’ Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance,” *Political Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2009): 335.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 348.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Koehler, “De-radicalization and Disengagement Programs as Counter-Terrorism and Prevention Tools. Insights From Field Experiences Regarding German Right-Wing Extremism and Jihadism,” in *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. M. Lombardi, et al., Burke: IOS Press, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Emilio Viano, “Investigating and Preventing Terrorism in Multicultural Urban Settings: Is a Balanced Approach Possible,” in *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. M. Lombardi, et al., Burke: IOS Press, 2015, 3.

established criteria of success and no standards” that apply universally.<sup>14</sup> Daniel Koehler cites the “establishment of transparent standards and legally sound guidelines regarding the data” as one of the “most important aspects” of a deradicalization program but cautions that the “least effective way of maintaining the programmes’ credibility and benefit from the counter-terrorism potential of these initiatives” is through “mandatory information sharing, as well as compulsory participation.”<sup>15</sup>

There is widespread disagreement about almost every part of these programs, from who runs them to who refers the individuals targeted for deradicalization. Are non-government entities likely to refer individuals in their communities for deradicalization to programs in which government law enforcement agencies are heavily involved? Does that make these programs automatically less effective because they are viewed skeptically by the communities that could be key to making them successful?

Additionally, there are questions about the reliance on self-reported successes and recidivism rates that are often used to determine if a program is effective. Tom Pettinger delves into several known examples of questionable statistics, including “startlingly... low rates of recidivism” by programs in Germany, Mauritius, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>16</sup> For scholarship that is already divided on if and how to judge the effectiveness of these programs, having statistics that are unreliable exacerbates questions on the efficacy of these programs.

### *Defining Success*

Unfortunately, there is little agreement on a collective framework for “determining what constitutes effectiveness or success.”<sup>17</sup> Horgan and Braddock’s 2009 work, which examines seven countries as individual case studies, also points out that no country has

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Barrett and Laila Bokhari, “Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world: An overview,” In *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and collective disengagement*, Edited by Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, New York: Routledge, 2009, 179.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel, Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, tools and programs for countering violent extremism*, New York: Routledge (2017), 102.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Pettinger, “De-radicalization and Counter-radicalization: Valuable Tools Combating Violent Extremism, or Harmful Methods of Subjugation?” *Journal for Deradicalization* 12 (Fall 2017): 11.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

attempted to “identify valid and reliable indicators of successful de-radicalization... [thus] any attempt to objectively evaluate the effectiveness any such program is beset with difficulties.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, as many of the countries who have deradicalization programs are less than transparent with their data, scholars are forced to rely on information that cannot be independently corroborated.

Additionally, as much of the scholarship mentions, success is often measured in recidivism rates. This in and of itself presents a problem because recidivism can only be measured after a participant’s release, and can often occur years, if not decades later. Additionally, as Porges and Stern point out, recidivism rates are often dependent upon intelligence services to track those who have participated, which often present an entirely different set of problems.<sup>19</sup>

### **Methodology and Limitations**

This paper uses two case studies to evaluate their relevant deradicalization programs using a qualitative approach. Where available, government-provided data is used to evaluate characteristics of populations that would likely be at risk for radicalization; who is being evaluated as a candidate for deradicalization; enrolled in a deradicalization program; and the outcomes for individual participants. In some instances, government data sets were available only through reporting by media outlets; in those instances, when reported by multiple reliable sources, they are included. When evaluating the failures of deradicalization programs, individual examples were culled from newspapers and scholarly publications, as in many cases, privacy laws required government data sets to remove personally identifiable data.

The details of the deradicalization programs were taken from government documents, news reports, and descriptions from officials who were either involved in their creation or are

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Marisa L. Porges and Jessica Stern, “Getting Deradicalization Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-05-01/getting-deradicalization-right>.

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involved in their day-to-day operations. In many cases, there remain details of the programs that are unknown. Where that is the case, the lack of information is noted.

When necessary, open sourced translations of official documents and news reports were used to clarify and/or verify information. In these cases, translations were checked by multiple sources to ensure accuracy. In the places where necessary, English translations of this data are used throughout the paper.

### Norway and the Birth of EXIT Programs

The strength and power of the far-right, skinhead movement reached its peak in Norway between 1995 and 1996. Although the exact number of participants is unknown, experts believe that some 100-300 Norwegians were actively involved in these groups. Clearly, as a proportion of the overall population, involvement in these groups was not overwhelming, their propensity for violence, which had been demonstrated on a host of occasions, including some described above, was a growing issue.

The problem had become pressing and the need for some action obvious. In February 1995, 78 members of far-right extremist groups were arrested in the Torshov district of Oslo at one of their hangouts called Nationalist House.<sup>20</sup> Police raided the house after the extremists began shooting at anti-racist protestors and found a large cache of weapons and extremist propaganda.<sup>21</sup> This mass arrest, which was followed by several more in 1995 and 1996, revealed a shocking truth.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of the arrestees were young – often under the age of 13 – and their parents were completely unaware of their participation in these radical groups.

Instead of continuing to bury their heads in the sand, in 1995 these parents sought

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<sup>20</sup> Prosjekt Exit: Sluttrapport [Project Exit: Final Report], Oslo: Organisasjonen Voksne for Barn, 2000, 19.

[https://docplayer.me/1333874-Prosjekt-exit-sluttrapport.html#show\\_full\\_text](https://docplayer.me/1333874-Prosjekt-exit-sluttrapport.html#show_full_text)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Tore Bjørge, “Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt), no. 627, June 2002, 18.

<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/27380/627.pdf>

assistance from a unit of the Manglerud police department that was devoted to violence and crime prevention; further, they pooled their resources and “established parental network groups” to aid their children’s disconnection from these groups.<sup>23</sup> These networks proved to be so effective in convincing these young people to leave these groups, that according to researchers, within months almost all the children of these parents had disengaged.<sup>24</sup> There are not exact numbers, however, nor does their appear to be data on the disengagement rates for children whose parents were not involved in the parental networks nor for older participants.

However, these parental networks served as the basis for more formal programs devoted to assisting parents to extract their children from similar groups. Parents reached out to Tore Bjørgo, a noted researcher in Norway on racist violence and youth participation in radical groups on how best to improve their efforts.<sup>25</sup> Bjørgo was, at the time, one of the leading researchers into violence committed by right-wing extremist groups, as well as what draws young people into joining these groups. His theory – quite different from many other researchers – was that people don’t join extremist groups because they “hold extremist views,” rather, “they often *acquire* extremist views because they have joined the groups for other reasons.”<sup>26</sup>

In conjunction with the Manglerud officers who had assisted in earlier efforts for disengaging the youth participants, Bjørgo began to create a more formal program in 1996. That same year, the government convened a group of experts focused on right-wing extremism – the Interdisciplinary Advisory Service for Local Action against Racism and Xenophobia, which included some of the most respected experts in the area.<sup>27</sup> Among the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Tina Wilchen Christensen, “How extremist experiences become valuable knowledge in EXIT programmes,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 3, (Summer 2015): 103.

<sup>27</sup> Froukje Demant, Marieke Slootman, Frank Buijs, and Jean Tillie, *Teruggang en uitreding: processen van deradicalisering ontleed [Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation]*, Amsterdam: IMES (2008), 158.

[https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/1079141/64714\\_Demant\\_Slootman\\_2008\\_Decline\\_and\\_Disengagement.pdf](https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/1079141/64714_Demant_Slootman_2008_Decline_and_Disengagement.pdf)

participants was Randi Talseth, the Secretary General for Adults for Children; Tore Bjørgo, who at the time was a researcher at the Norwegian Institute of international affairs; Magnus Betten, Bjørn Øvrum, and Petter Bærum from the Manglerud Police; Beate Kaupang from the Vestfold County Council; Terje Bang from the Church City Mission in Tønsberg; Nina Solberg from Sirvente, a professional services company; and Else Berg Løland, the Regional Director for Adults for Children in Kristiansand.<sup>28</sup>

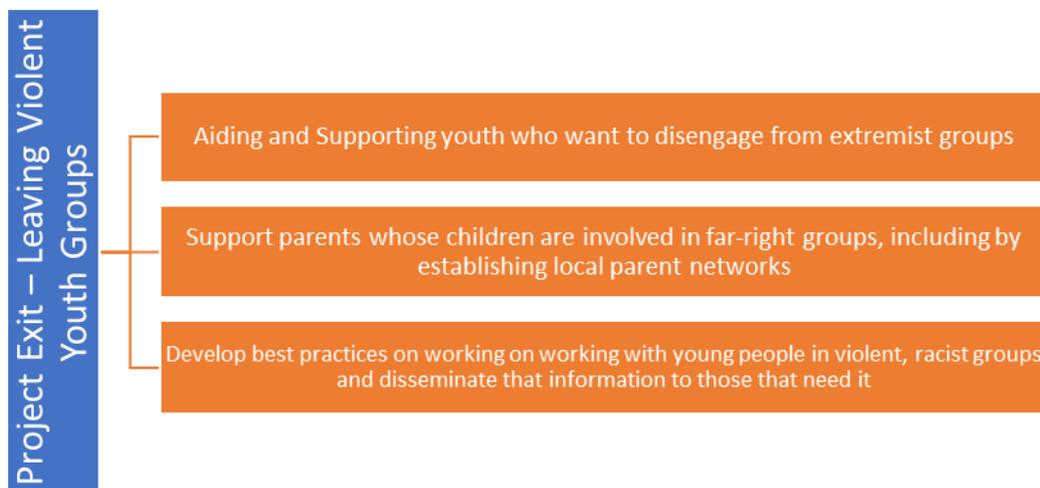
The group was specifically designed to assist local municipalities in addressing their right-wing extremism problem when it arose, allowing for the proliferation of best practices that could be used across the country as needed. Because it was created with an eye toward a local problem, the program formulated by Bjørgo and the Manglerud police became one of the group's key components.

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<sup>28</sup> *Prosjekt Exit: Sluttrapport*, 20.

Additionally, the Norwegian government was finally able to take a more proactive approach to addressing the problem of right-wing radicalism and participation in extremist skinhead groups. In 1997, the program was granted three-years of funding by the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Children, and the Directorate of Immigration and was hosted by the Adults for Children NGO. The program was christened Project Exit – Leaving Violent Youth Groups and had three main objectives, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

**PROJECT EXIT AND ITS OBJECTIVES (FIGURE 1)<sup>29</sup>**



SOURCE: TORE BJØRGO, “EXIT NEO-NAZISM: REDUCING RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTING DISENGAGEMENT FROM RACIST GROUPS.”

In keeping with the mission of the Interdisciplinary Advisory Service for Local Action against Racism and Xenophobia, Project Exit focused on working at the local level – empowering officials with best practices, rather than building an entirely different system by which to address the youth involvement. A considerable part of the program was devoted to training those that would regularly come into contact with individuals that were actively involved in the far-right groups, as well as those that were at risk of falling into those groups. According to Project Exit data, the program trained some 700 professionals, including

<sup>29</sup> Bjørgo, “Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups,” 19.

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“teachers, local youth workers, police agents,”<sup>30</sup> to carry out the mission of Project Exit.

As previously described, when Norway decided to tackle its neo-Nazi program in the mid-1990s, the vast majority of participants in these groups were very young and in many ways exhibit the same characteristics of youth across the world that are at risk of becoming involved with violent ideologies. Members of the far-right groups were often poorly educated, having “only achieved basic vocational training” and are, in some way, experiencing “social and societal problems.”<sup>31</sup> The Norwegian Police Security Service (PST), who are involved with monitoring and identifying members and groups within this ecosphere, also state that members “lack a social safety net” and have sometimes had “violent confrontation with a group of young immigrants” that causes them to seek solace in groups espousing ideologies against these groups.<sup>32</sup>

According to Adults for Children, youth were often initially drawn to these extremist groups not for their ideologies but for the groups themselves. They are looking for a place to belong with individuals of a similar age that have shared experiences, and neo-Nazi groups give them all of that. When helping youth to deradicalize and disengage ideology may often be a secondary factor in participation in these groups; “the majority” of extremists who participated in Neo-Nazi groups in Kristiansand “had only a superficial and fragmentary picture of racist ideology... [and] the group mostly provided a strong group identity.”<sup>33</sup> While some are drawn to the violence because they are true believers in the white supremacist thought, most are not. Therefore, Project Exit had to be developed in such a way to address the primary reasons that individuals joined these groups, not simply focused on combatting the ideology.

#### *Parental Networks as an Integral part to Project Exit*

As Project Exit grew out of parental networks that were devoted to helping their

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<sup>30</sup> Demant, Slooman, Buijs, and Tillie, 158.

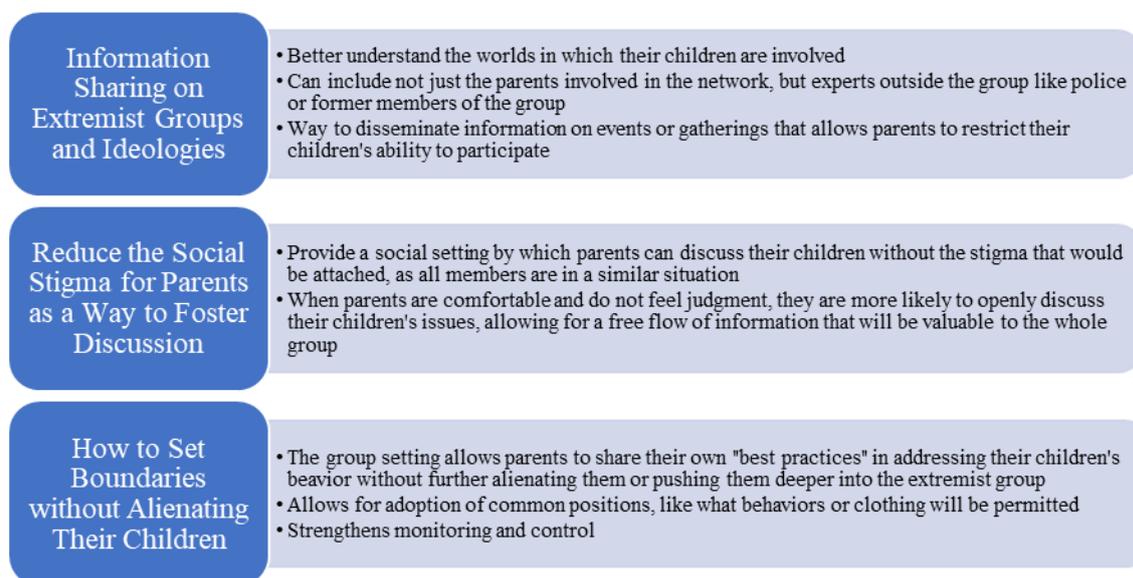
<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 163

children leave neo-Nazi groups, these networks remained an integral component to Exit. According to Bjørgo, parents are “in a central position to influence... their children’s behavior,” and parents of teenagers can often benefit from networks of other parents in similar situations.<sup>34</sup> Parents, and subsequently their children who are involved in extremist activity, have been shown to benefit from participation in a parental network as described in Figure 2. Perhaps for than anything, these parental networks provide a bonding and information sharing space, where parents are not saddled with the embarrassment and shame that often comes with a child participating in extremist behavior. Rather, these spaces allow parents to develop connections with others in similar circumstances and to learn from their shared experiences. The parental networks also provide a conduit for outside experts to receive and share information that can be utilized immediately, as there are no bureaucratic layers to wade through.

**BENEFITS OF PARENTAL NETWORKS (FIGURE 2)<sup>35</sup>**



SOURCE: TORE BJØRGO, “EXIT NEO-NAZISM: REDUCING RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTING DISENGAGEMENT FROM RACIST GROUPS.”

<sup>34</sup> Bjørgo, “Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups,” 19.  
<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 19-20.

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However, there is a recognition that these parental networks are not sufficient in all cases. For example, some parents hold viewpoints similar to the extremist groups that their children are involved, while others are “afraid of being branded as bad parents” or are happy that their children have friends when they haven’t in the past and still others refuse to participate in talking about their familial issues in a group setting.<sup>36</sup> In the cases where parental networks are not applicable, other aspects of the Exit program can be utilized; therefore, a young person is not left to the clutches of the group if parental support is not available.

While there are some limitations to the parental networks, the data indicates that they are largely successful in disengaging young people from neo-Nazi groups. The parent-driven portion of Exit had a success rate of almost 90 percent<sup>37</sup> when the project drew to a close – the result of the government deeming the problem of right-wing radicalism solved. Specifically, according to Bjørgo, around 130 parents participated in parental networks between 1995 and 2000, with 100 children amongst them; and by the end of the five-year period, only 10 of those 100 children remained as a part of a neo-Nazi group.<sup>38</sup> However, there is not even data to prove that the parental networks were the deciding factor in youth leaving extremist groups – or even a factor at all, though Bjørgo says that the parental networks made a “decisive impact in many cases.”<sup>39</sup>

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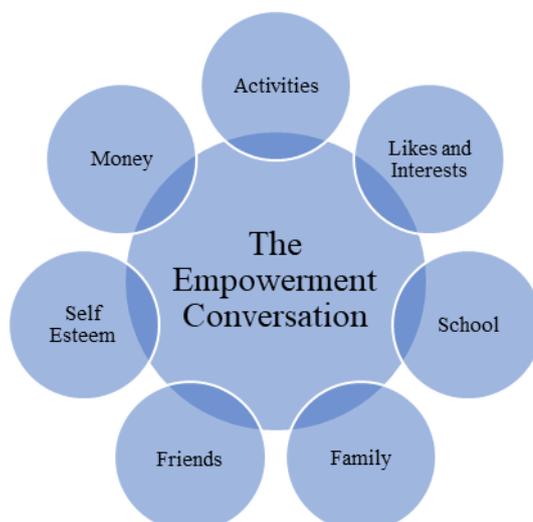
<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Ellie B. Hearne, “Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism,” International Peace Institute, 2008, 5. <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/beter.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Bjørgo, “Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups,” 21.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

**THE EMPOWERMENT CONVERSATION  
(FIGURE 3)**



SOURCE: TORE BJØRGO, AND YNGVE CARLSSON "EARLY INTERVENTION WITH VIOLENT AND RACIST YOUTH GROUPS."

*Empowerment Conversations: Addressing Current Circumstances By Revisiting Needs and Wants*

While parental networks are key to Exit, they are not the sole component. Exit also incorporates what it refers to as “conversations” or “preventative talks” as a key element to the program. While the parental network portion of Exit – as well as participation in the overarching program – is not compulsory, if a person under the age of 18 is identified as being involved in criminal activity, participating in violent extremist organizations, or at risk of joining criminal organizations, these individuals and their parents are required to speak with the police if contacted. What is most notable about these conversations is that although the specific criminal act – in this case belonging to the right-wing extremist group – is the basis for the conversation, it is not the focus.<sup>40</sup> Instead, using a “conversational tactic

<sup>40</sup> “Practical Guide to the Deradicalization of Youngsters,” FORUM, Institute for Multicultural Development, 31. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/?action=media.download&uuid=29B8D699-CC10-B759-0CFD0E7FD2D77078>

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called ‘The Empowerment Conversation’ which focuses on understanding the individuals’ goals and sense of self, and promoting a positive view of self,”<sup>41</sup> police begin a conversation meant to understand and persuade, not necessarily enact punishment.

Pioneered by Bjørn Øvrum, a preventative police officer, the Empowerment Conversation is best understood as a type of behavioral therapy that seeks to show a young offender that the path they are on could have significant negative consequences for whatever they hope to accomplish in the future, as well as to help that offender better understand how their current behavior can be explained.<sup>42</sup> One of the most important portions of the Empowerment Conversation involves examining the behaviors and/or needs that led that young person to join the extremist group and examining possible alternatives that could meet them outside of the group. The areas discussed as part of the Empowerment Conversation can be seen in Figure 3. As many of these young people are looking for a sense of belonging and friendships, part of the discussion could revolve around which legal and socially acceptable activities or groups could become an alternative. Ultimately, the point is to “look forward... to stimulate the reorientation and alteration of behaviour.”<sup>43</sup>

Although originally designed for the police to conduct these conversations, the success of these conversations led to an expansion of the program. Teachers, counselors, social workers, and other professionals were trained in how to optimize these conversations, which allowed a larger number of at-risk youth who were involved in far-right activity to receive interventions. Additionally, with a parent’s consent, information on the young adult and the specifics of their case would be shared with other agencies “to help the child through coordinated efforts.”<sup>44</sup> This permission is required because – unlike in the U.S. where information can often be shared between agencies and interagency cooperation is encouraged

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<sup>41</sup> Vidhya Ramalingam and Henry Tuck, “The Need to Exit Programmes: Why Deradicalization and Disengagement Matters in the UK’s Approach to Far-Right Violence,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, September 2014, 8. [https://www.counterextremism.org/download\\_file/363/134/682/](https://www.counterextremism.org/download_file/363/134/682/)

<sup>42</sup> Tore Bjørge and Yngve Carlsson, “Early Intervention with Violent and Racist Youth Groups,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt), no. 677, 2005, 95-96. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/27305/677.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

– there are “strict rules of confidentiality practiced by social agencies.”<sup>45</sup>

Although there are not comprehensive statistics for the entire country’s use of Empowerment Conversations, there is one example that demonstrates how effective the program can be. The Norwegian city of Kristiansand, located on the southern coast with a population around 75,000, became a breeding ground in the mid-1990s for groups of teenaged boys with extreme far-right views.<sup>46</sup> Several different programs, including those developed within Project Exit were dispatched to the city to deal with the growing problem. Beginning in 1996, a task force comprised of police, teachers, social workers, and youth officials utilized the Empowerment Conversation tactic to attempt to deradicalize and disengagement a group of 38 young people who were actively involved in the far-right extremist movement.<sup>47</sup> Within five years, twenty-nine of those participants were living what is described as “relatively normal lives,” three of the participants were dead from accidents or drug-related overdoses, and only six remained actively participating in neo-Nazi groups.<sup>48</sup> The group of participants had expanded by the end of 2001 to include 60 different young people, with 49 of them having disengaged and deradicalized – a rate of 82%. Like the parental networks, it is difficult to state conclusively that participation in Empowerment Conversations were the main reason that individuals chose to deradicalize and disengage.

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

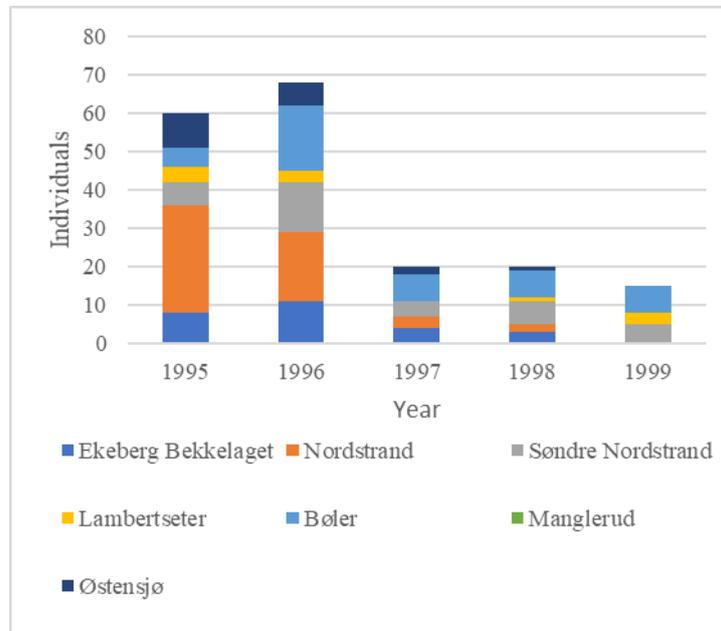
<sup>46</sup> Demant, Sloodman, Buijs, and Tillie, 161

<sup>47</sup> Bjørge and Carlsson, 96.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

**POLICE CONTACTS WITH FAR-RIGHT INDIVIDUALS**

**(FIGURE 4)**



SOURCE: *PROSJEKT EXIT SLUTTRAPPORT*

*Effectiveness of the Project Exit in Norway and What It Means for Current Right-Wing Extremism*

The Norwegian government considers Project Exit to be a success, and there is clearly evidence that the program – as well as its component parts – to support that narrative. As described previously, there was some demonstrable success stories; seemingly, if individuals participated in part of the program, they left far-right extremist groups in high rates. Additionally, as Figure 4<sup>49</sup> demonstrates, the number of individuals that the police had contact with who were judged to be members to be members of these groups dropped precipitously after Project Exit began. In 1996, 68 people from the selected seven areas were identified and by 1999, that number had dropped to 15 – a 78% decrease.<sup>50</sup>

Norway’s exit program focused on young adults, making early intervention the top

<sup>49</sup> *Prosjekt Exit: Sluttrapport*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*

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priority. Bjørgo credits this early intervention as “one of the main reasons why the neo-Nazi scene in Norway [remained] relatively small, young, and characterised by short careers and few veterans”<sup>51</sup> in 2002. However, even then, there was a recognition that the program had far less success when the targeted participants were older. That may be one of the reasons that “right-wing extremism is no longer a typical youth problem anymore,” but instead these groups “are now almost exclusively constituted by adults.”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, Norway’s most shocking and heinous right-wing violence in the last decade came from 32-year-old Anders Behring Breivik who killed 77 people by setting off a car bomb and conducting a shooting massacre at the annual youth summer camp of the governing Labor Party.<sup>53</sup> Breivik had all of the characteristics that Project Exit sought to identify and address, yet he was well past the targeted age for a parental intervention or an Empowerment Conversation. His act also came seemingly “out of the blue” in Norway, which had seen “very limited militant right-wing extremist activity or violence” since 2002.<sup>54</sup> However, could his behavior have been an indication of growing right-wing extremism in Norway?

While, there are indications that there right-wing thinking is making a comeback through anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, and white power groups and political parties, initial evidence points to these groups being all hat and no cattle. While groups like the *Stop Islamisation of Norway (SIAN)* and *Pegda Norway* have active online presences, even large groups can “only muster a few dozens for public demonstration” because of a fear of both counter-protestors and being identified and stigmatized as being a part of the group.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, in interviews with leaders of current far-right groups, Tore Bjørgo and Ingvild

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<sup>51</sup> Bjørgo, “Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups,” 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> Tore Bjørgo, “Right-Wing Extremism in Norway: Changes and Challenges,” UiO: C-REX – Center for Research on Extremism, 25 Feb 2019, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/right-wing-extremism-in-norway.html>

<sup>53</sup> Sindre Bangstad, “Don’t Look Now: Can Norway reckon with the reality of right-wing extremists?” *World Policy Journal*, 35 no. 2 (Summer 2018), 34.

<sup>54</sup> Tore Bjørgo and Ingvild Magnæs Gjelsvik, *Right-Wing Extremists and anti-Islam Activists in Norway: Constraints against Violence*, Norwegian Police University College and Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Oslo: University of Oslo (2017), 2.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

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Magnæs Gjelsvik found that today's groups are "far more restrained" in justifying violence today than similar groups were in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> However, Bjørge and Gjelsvik also point out that there are holes in this recent work – including a lack of interviews with participants in the most violent neo-Nazi groups, which could change some of the conclusions they draw. Going forward, it will be important to watch these groups to determine if their propensity for violence increases. If it does, researchers and practitioners may need to revisit Project Exit for use with an older population.

### Sweden Tackles Disengagement and Deradicalization

If Norway's problem with neo-Nazi and extremist far-right groups were relatively small and often concentrated in disorganized groups of teenaged boys, Sweden's problem was far larger and more organized. Sweden had a long history with organized Nazi movements dating back to 1924, and although the ideology suffered in the wake of the German defeat in World War II, it rebounded in 1956 with the founding of *Nordiska rikspartiet* (NRP), which became "the institution that collected, developed and restructured the ideas, experiences and aims of the pre-war and wartime Nazi movements to create the contemporary Nazi movements, in the form of subcultural groups and parties."<sup>57</sup> In the intervening years, the Nazi movement and took two separate paths – one part of the group focused on addressing immigration and developed the *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* (Keep Sweden Swedish) group that was adopted a "cultural racist view," the other "remained faithful to the Nazi ideology."<sup>58</sup>

By the 1980s and 1990s, the neo-Nazi groups in Sweden were increasingly militant and violent in their ideologies and had committed a number of high-profile violent crimes. Where Norway's neo-Nazi movement was often considered to have only about 100-150

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, 15-16.

<sup>57</sup> Christer Mattsson and Thomas Johansson, "Becoming, belonging and leaving – Exit processes among young neo-Nazis in Sweden," *Journal for Deradicalization* 16, (Fall 2018), 36.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*

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active members – possibly as many as 300 in its heyday – Sweden had close to 3,000.<sup>59</sup>

With supporters well into the thousands, a larger concern was the group of hangers-on and sympathizers that the neo-Nazi groups were able to attract within the country, expanding the number those with neo-Nazi extremist ties by thousands. In fact, the groups attracted enough followers that researchers and observers classified them as part of a “movement” rather than a more nebulous ideology. The strength of the movement also means that it is “sufficiently strong and intimidating to provide some protection against outside enemies,” including the authorities.<sup>60</sup> In their examination of why young people join and leave racist groups, Tore Bjørgo and Yngve Carlsson additionally point to the “big and profitable ‘home market’” that allows for the groups to attract individuals with a wide variety of skills, which in turn creates an “elaborate organizational, economical and media infrastructure” that is “socially attractive” for young people.<sup>61</sup> The attractiveness of the movement is also a clear differentiator as compared to the neo-Nazi scene in Norway, where social and familial shame and embarrassment around participation in far-right extremist ideologies was possibly one of the factors that kept their movement small and relatively limited to youthful participants.

In Sweden, the attractiveness of the movement combined with the economic opportunities within the movement attracted better educated and less socially isolated individuals. This was not a movement of mal-adjusted, social misfits, rather, Sweden’s scene featured skilled participants like “computer specialists, academics, [and] university students.”<sup>62</sup> Consequently, there was room for growth within the movement, as well as the ability for younger participants to age within the movement. A significant portion of Sweden’s extreme right-wing movement are in “their twenties or thirties and have already been involved in the movement for ten years or more.”<sup>63</sup> The age of participants – and the extended time they have been involved in the movement – presents a number of challenges

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<sup>59</sup> Bjørgo, “Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups,” 5.

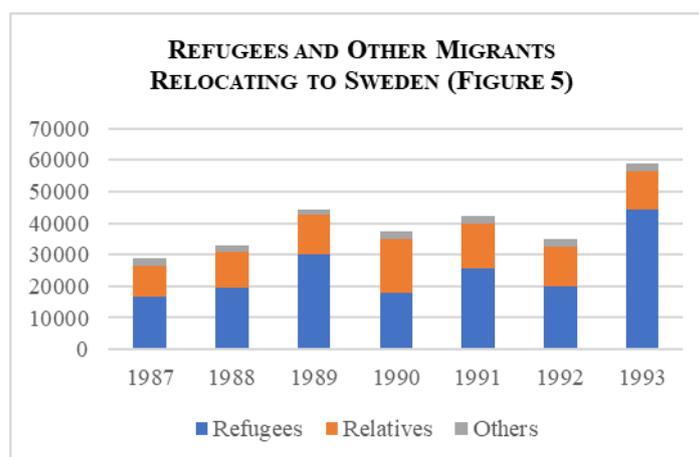
<sup>60</sup> Bjørgo and Carlsson, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Bjørgo and Carlsson, 12.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

<sup>63</sup> Demant, Sloodman, Buijs, and Tillie, 163.

for authorities looking to quash neo-Nazi organizations. Because there are many veterans of the group, authorities have a difficult time creating a leadership vacuum, with the idea that this would ultimately lead to the groups dissolving. Instead, when leaders are put into prison, “there are plenty of alternative leaders to take over.”<sup>64</sup>



SOURCE: HELÉNE LÖÖW, “RACIST VIOLENCE AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR IN SWEDEN: MYTHS AND REALITY.”

### *Growth of Immigrants, Neo-Nazi Groups, and Racist Attacks*

While there are a number of reasons that violent, neo-Nazi ideology seemed to grow during this period, there is a clearly a correlation between the increasing number of migrants and refugees admitted into the country and the growth and strengthening of these groups. As Figure 5 demonstrates, the number of immigrants grew dramatically between 1987 and 1993.<sup>65</sup>

As the number of immigrants grew, so did the number of serious, violent attacks on the population. In 1993, there were 787 police cases “where circumstances indicated that the motive behind the crime was political, xenophobic or racist in nature,” an increase from the

<sup>64</sup> Bjørgo and Carlsson, 13

<sup>65</sup> Heléne Lööw, “Racist Violence and Criminal Behavior in Sweden: Myths and Reality,” In *Terror From The Extreme Right*, edited by Tore Bjørgo. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1995, 130.

359 reported crimes in 1992 police reports.<sup>66</sup>

Unsurprisingly, during this time, there is a relationship between the number of racist and xenophobic crimes and the amount of neo-Nazi activity reported in the county. In 1993, the four counties with the highest number of crimes with racist motives – Stockholm (223 crimes), Västernorrland (92 crimes), Dalarna (72 crimes), and Västra Götaland (72 crimes), only Västernorrland had extremist activity rated as something other than “high” – its activity was rated as negligible.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, and unexplainably, Västernorrland’s data is similar to the other countries in the northern part of Sweden where racist violence and far-right activity do not seem to be related.

### *The Creation of an Exit Program*

It is with the background of changing demographics and a growing threat of right-wing extremist violence, that Sweden’s Exit program was born. With the Norwegian Exit program in its infancy but showing signs of promise, the leaders of the program latched onto the idea of spreading similar programs to surrounding areas with a demonstrated need. In 1996, the Norwegian leaders attended a conference with representatives from Fryshuset, a Swedish NGO.<sup>68</sup> Fryshuset, founded in the fall of 1984 in conjunction with the YMCA, had already cemented itself as a cultural space for young adults that promoted “empowerment and tolerance by building social relations and interactions,” while maintaining that it was open to all who wished to participate in its activities that often range from sports to music and everything in between.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to building relationships with Fryshuset, the leaders of the Norwegian Exit program, made sure to get buy-in from Kent Lindahl, a former neo-Nazi who had left the extremist ideology in the early 1990s and had begun traveling to Swedish schools with Jewish

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, 133-134.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, 136.

<sup>68</sup> Maria Alvanou, “Swedish EXIT and international De-radicalization programs,” *Pemptousia*, 3 April 2015, <https://pemptousia.com/2015/04/swedish-exit-and-international-de-radicalization-programs-interview-with-the-inspiring-expert-robert-orell/>.

<sup>69</sup> Christensen, 97-99.

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Holocaust survivors in the hopes of discouraging young people from joining similar groups.<sup>70</sup> Lindahl was intrigued by both the program and its success, and Exit in Sweden was formally established in 1998.

While keeping the same goals of deradicalizing and disengaging individuals involved in neo-Nazi and other far-right extremist groups as the Norwegian version, Sweden's program had two major differences: the program would focus on individuals that reached out themselves for help in exiting violent groups (rather than the program doing the proactive outreach) and a large percentage of the leadership of the program would not be researchers and other similar professionals, but former members of the far-right ideology. The two programmatic differences were intended to grow credibility and increase the likelihood of success. If the Exit program was only working with individuals who had, themselves, reached out for help in leaving the violent ideology, there was a greater chance that they were serious about making the necessary changes in their lives. As previously described, Sweden's neo-Nazi groups were relatively powerful, so there was a chance that someone looking to leave the group would be in physical danger; there are a number of case studies that support violence committed by Neo-Nazi groups after former members have defected or committed "treason."<sup>71</sup> therefore, it was unlikely someone would risk bodily injury only to change their mind. The inclusion of former neo-Nazis as leaders in the program lent the program credibility with potential participants. Additionally, these former extremists were more easily able to "establish contact with youths who are considering disengaging from the movement."<sup>72</sup>

### *The Five-Step Process*

Because participation was predicated on an interested individual reaching out to Exit Sweden, there was less of a need in this program, as opposed to the Norwegian program, to

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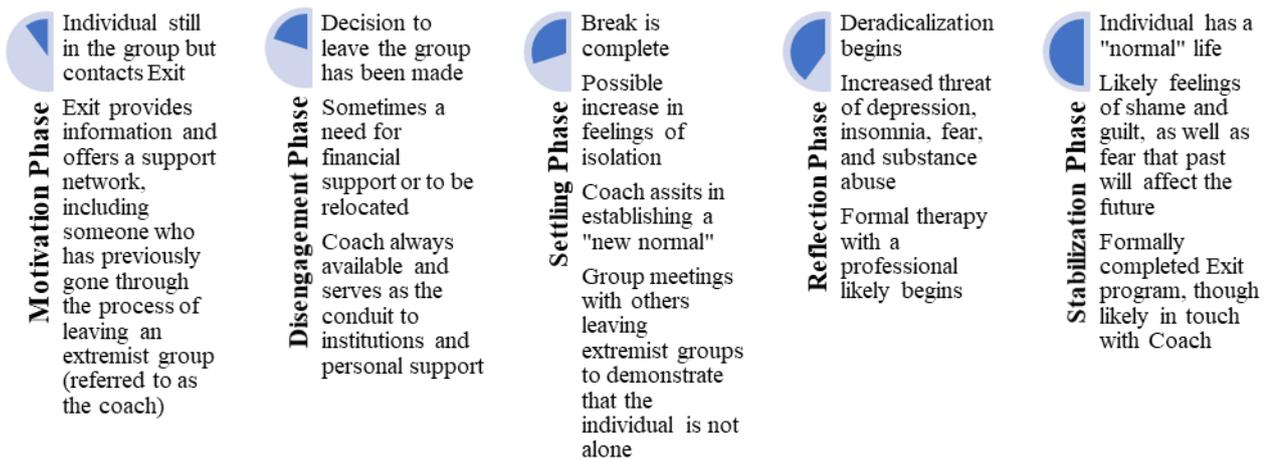
<sup>70</sup> Bjørge, "Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups," 23.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Koehler, "Radical Groups' Social Pressure Toward Defectors: The Case of Right-Wing Extremist Groups," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9 Vol. 6 (December 2015), 40.

<sup>72</sup> Demant, Sloodman, Buijs, and Tillie, 163.

demonstrate that there was life outside of the extremist group or to convince the individual that leaving was even an option. Therefore, the program set out to address the “practical, social, and emotional” needs of their participants and developed a five step process to do so.<sup>73</sup> This process, as seen in Figure 6, helps to walk an individual through the entire disengagement and deradicalization process with a realization that it is likely that it will take between six to twelve months, if not longer.

**SWEDEN EXIT PROCESS (FIGURE 6)<sup>74</sup>**



It is important to emphasize that staff within the program *do not* address ideology or attempt to challenge the beliefs of far-right extremist groups. According to literature on the program, the reason that staff avoid challenging extremist ideology directly is that the groups “school their members with all the relevant counter-arguments so this can be a futile approach

<sup>73</sup> “English Summary, Exit: A follow-up and evaluation of the organization for people wishing to leave racist and nazi groups,” Stockholm: National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ), 2001, 46.  
[https://www.bra.se/download/18.cba82f7130f475a2f1800028108/1371914734840/2001\\_exit\\_a\\_follow-up\\_and\\_evaluation.pdf](https://www.bra.se/download/18.cba82f7130f475a2f1800028108/1371914734840/2001_exit_a_follow-up_and_evaluation.pdf)

<sup>74</sup> Demant, Sloodman, Buijs, and Tillie, 163-164.

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to take and simply put the young person into defensive mode.”<sup>75</sup> Rather, the focus is on reintegrating individuals back into society, while providing them with the mental and financial support required to turn away from their former lives.

Because the push and pull of involvement with extremist ideologies is rarely an easy string to sever, individuals often oscillate between steps. The progression of disengagement and deradicalization usually does not follow a linear path, and instead involves “relapses into old patterns of behaviour and thought” that may cause an individual to revert back to previous phases for a time period.<sup>76</sup> This constant struggle and potential backsliding for individuals leaving extremism is one of the main reasons that Exit Sweden emphasizes the necessity of building a relationship between an exiting individual and their coach (as described in the five step process in Figure 6). A key part of this client/coach relationship is the participation in interactions and activities outside of the extremist groups, which help “the client [in] coping in new settings and entering different worlds.”<sup>77</sup> The coach’s presence in these situations not only provides support in navigating situations that an individual may not have experienced since joining a neo-Nazi group, but also can be used to discuss the interactions at a later time to determine what other support might be necessary. Especially in the early days of disengagement, a coach and staff from the Exit program are available twenty-four hours a day to step in at a moment’s notice, often taking the place of family and friends that have left behind.

Coaches are an integral part to the success or failure of Exit Sweden’s program; therefore, training them to best help their clients is an important part of how the program is designed. Because many of these coaches are former members of extreme far-right groups themselves, an early part of the program is teaching them how to relate to their clients in the most successful way. More experienced coaches and professional counselors help new

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<sup>75</sup> “Case Study Report: EXIT Fryshuset, Sweden,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 1998, [https://www.counterextremism.org/download\\_file/90/134/63/](https://www.counterextremism.org/download_file/90/134/63/)

<sup>76</sup> Tina Wilchen Christensen, “A Question of Participation – Disengagement from the Extremist Right: A case study of Sweden,” (PhD diss., Roskilde University, October 2015), 82. [https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/files/56384428/twc\\_fin\\_ny.pdf](https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/files/56384428/twc_fin_ny.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 101.

coaches break down issues that their clients may have “by deconstructing a situation into small pieces, making it possible to see how A might lead to B.”<sup>78</sup> As individuals leaving extremist groups are learning how to reintegrate into society and social situations, one of the most important messages of coaches and the Exit program in general is that they have the ability to influence situations – ultimately, that these experiences do not have a predetermined conclusion. Coaches learn how to communicate through these situations, but ultimately to realize that each individual is different and what works with one person leaving extremist groups may not translate directly to someone else.

Like all forms of therapy, the Exit program is not an exact science and coaches act as an important point by which the program can be tailored. However, coaches may face negative effects from participating in the program if the individual that they are working with more quickly goes through the phases of deradicalization and disengagement than the coach did or if situations with their client cause them to backslide. As discussed, disengagement and deradicalization is not a linear path and coaches – even those that have been removed from their former extremist group for long periods of time – can be at risk. The European Commission’s examination of the Exit program emphasizes this possibility and details the possible need to have a chain of coaches that are available if a client surpasses their coach in their process.<sup>79</sup>

### *Support Outside of The Five Step Process*

Even though Exit Sweden focuses the majority of its resources on therapies, support, and programs that directly interface with individuals leaving violent right-wing extremist groups, Exit Sweden does provide assistance in other areas, as well. Although they do not play as large a role as the program in Norway, Sweden’s Exit program has a supporting

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, 148.

<sup>79</sup> “Swedish method of working with formers in Exit work,” European Commission, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/7415\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/7415_en).

program for parents in the Klippan area.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, parents unable to receive assistance through that can turn to the Exit program itself for help in understanding both the nature of the group that their child has been a part of as well as how they should approach their children and how they can be supportive during the disengagement and deradicalization process. Specifically, Exit offers services ranging from helping to “convene meetings between the family and a range of service providers... [and] assist with police contact and protection where the family has been threatened by the group.”<sup>81</sup>

In addition to providing direct support to family members, Exit also provides resources to professionals that come into contact with young people of how to understand neo-Nazi groups, their ideology, and the warning signs that an individual may be at risk for joining such a group or has recently joined one. These targeted professionals include teachers, counselors, police, and social services workers, and the program goes as far as to teach them how to reach out to individuals within the movements and conduct case work to support them if they decide to disengage from their current activities.<sup>82</sup> According to data from Exit’s program, these resources and lectures are in such high demand that in 2001 they were turning down roughly a quarter of all requests because they did not have the necessary staff to complete them.<sup>83</sup> By 2001, Exit had supplied resources or conducted lectures on 179 occasions – the majority of them – 63% - at institutions of higher education.<sup>84</sup>

### *Exit Motala*

In addition to the Exit Sweden program, which is sometimes referred to Exit Stockholm or Exit Fryshuset in current literature, there is a similar program in Motala

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<sup>80</sup> “English Summary, Exit: A follow-up and evaluation of the organization for people wishing to leave racist and nazi groups,”

<sup>81</sup> “Case Study Report: EXIT Fryshuset, Sweden,”

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*

<sup>83</sup> “Exit för avhoppare: En uppföljning och utvärdering av verksamheten åren 1998-2001,” Brottsförebyggande rådet centrum för kunskap om brott och åtgärder mot brott, Stockholm: Elanders Gotab (2001), 31.

[https://www.bra.se/download/18.cba82f7130f475a2f1800019088/1371914731757/2001\\_8\\_exit\\_for\\_avhoppare.pdf](https://www.bra.se/download/18.cba82f7130f475a2f1800019088/1371914731757/2001_8_exit_for_avhoppare.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*

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(referred to subsequently as Exit Motala) that was founded in 1999. Exit Motala diverges in a number of ways from Exit Sweden that make comparisons between them virtually meaningless. Instead of focusing exclusively on individuals leaving neo-Nazi organizations, Exit Motala also has programs for “marginalised young immigrants from violent groups... [and] asylum seekers.”<sup>85</sup> The program geared towards immigrants and asylum seekers, called Amir, was expanded in 2002.<sup>86</sup> Notably, though it has separate programs for those leaving right-wing extremism, immigrants, asylum seekers, and women who are involved in neo-Nazi groups, Exit Motala does make an effort to integrate the groups in as many activities as they can.

Additionally, their goals are much broader. Though deradicalization and disengagement is, of course, a key focus, they also highlight the “promotion of democratic principles” and “combating of racism and marginalization.”<sup>87</sup> By highlighting these components, Exit Motala had virtually abandoned the principle of Exit Sweden to not engage on ideology. Although the two programs initially worked very closely together, by late 2001 any cooperation had virtually ceased. In addition to the ideological differences between Exit Motala and Exit Sweden, there was a “bitter dispute” between leaders of the programs.<sup>88</sup> Anita Bjargvide, a social worker who had taken over Exit Motala, accused Exit Sweden of “lacking proper oversight” that was leading to fraud including a deliberate inflation of the number of people it had helped to leave neo-Nazi groups in order for the government to increase its funding levels.<sup>89</sup> After the split, Exit Motala has been run with government funds.

### *Exit Sweden's Success*

Like with most programs that receive government funding, the Swedish government

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<sup>85</sup> Demant, Slooman, Buijs, and Tillie, 165

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*

<sup>88</sup> Liz Fekete, “Exit from White Supremacism: the accountability gap in Europe’s de-radicalisation programmes,” Institute of Race Relations European Research Programme, Briefing No. 8, Sept. 2014, 3. <http://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/wpmedia.outlandish.com/irr/2017/04/26155140/ERP-Briefing-No-8-Exit.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*

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ordered an evaluation of the program to determine its efficacy and whether continued funding was warranted. The Swedish Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) was tasked with the evaluation after three years of Exit Sweden's work with extreme far-right groups in 2001. According to the BRÅ's evaluation, over 90 percent of the individuals that passed through Exit Sweden were young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, statistics that were consistent with the overall make-up of far-right groups.<sup>90</sup>

By this time, approximately 133 individuals had gone through Exit Sweden – and the vast majority were considered to be successful disengagement and deradicalizations. As demonstrated in Figure 7, 125 of the 133 individuals had left far-right extremist groups – a 94 percent success rate.<sup>91</sup> However, it is important to highlight that five of the individuals that were considered to be successful had been involved in the program for less than one month. Therefore, it is very difficult to truly say that they have completely disengaged and deradicalized; a reexamination of their situations after the passage of more time is warranted. Overall, out of the 125 individuals who left neo-Nazi groups, five had been part of the program for less than one month; thirty for between one and six months; 50 between seven months and a year; and fifteen for between fourteen months and three years.<sup>92</sup> Because each individual attempting to separate himself (or herself) from right-wing extremist groups has a different path, it is impossible to draw any conclusions from how long a person participates in Exit. Just because someone has been involved for three years does not necessarily mean that they have made progress the entire time and have reached the Stabilization Phase, just as someone who has only been involved for six months cannot necessarily be assumed to be in one of the earlier phases. As previously discussed, individuals can vacillate between phases; even when they are almost completely disengaged, they may suffer setbacks that send them spiraling back several phases. Therefore, using an individual's length of time in the Exit

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<sup>90</sup> Demant, Slooman, Buijs, and Tillie, 164.

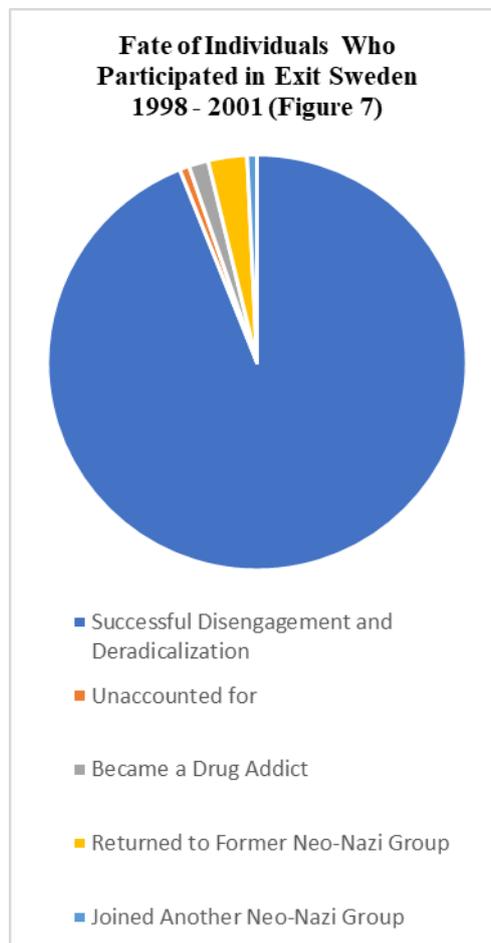
<sup>91</sup> Emma Disley, Kristin Weed, Anaïs Reding, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Richard Warnes, "Individual disengagement from Al Qaeda-influenced terrorist groups: A Rapid Evidence Assessment to inform policy and practice in preventing terrorism," Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism- UK Home Office, Occasional Paper 99, November 2011, 116.

<sup>92</sup> "Exit för avhoppare: En uppföljning och utvärdering av verksamheten åren 1998-2001," 21.

Sweden program is not a particularly useful gauge of success or even of progress. The data gathered by the BRÅ does have some interesting statistics on when individuals (who are considered to have successfully disengaged and deradicalized) first reached out to Exit for help and on what phase they reported to be on when they left the program, as not all individuals stay in contact with the program through all of the phases. While the vast majority of these individuals – 83 out of 133 – reach out to Exit while they are in the first two steps of the process, 16 individuals began their engagement with the Exit program after they had already completed the initial steps of removing themselves from the far-right ideology and joined the program during the Settling Phase (phase three) or later.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, most individuals left Exit during the latter half of the program, with 42 leaving during the Reflection Phase (phase four) and 25 during the Stabilization Phase (phase five). This would seem to indicate that individuals who began the program stayed to work through many of the phases. However, there is no information about whether those that left later in the program joined during later phases, leaving open the possibility that some joined during the third phase and the left during the fourth phase.

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid*, 25.



SOURCE: EMMA DISLEY, KRISTIN WEED, ANAÏS REDING, LINDSAY CLUTTERBUCK, AND RICHARD WARNES, "INDIVIDUAL DISENGAGEMENT FROM AL QA'IDA-INFLUENCED TERRORIST GROUPS: A RAPID EVIDENCE ASSESSMENT TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE IN PREVENTING TERRORISM."

While the program seems to have been successful in the first several years of its existence, evaluating data from a longer period of time it useful for gauging the long-term viability of the program. Robert Örell, the Assistant Director of Exit Sweden, provided general data in 2008, which incorporates ten years of the program's existence. He said that the program had served around 600 individuals and that only two were known to them as having

returned to the far-right extremist movement.<sup>94</sup> However, more in-depth information on yearly statistics, specifically those of a similar nature to the BRÅ are unavailable. The only data that is available details how many new cases by year Exit Sweden had from 2005 – 2009, with additional data on individuals that were still receiving services or after-program support. Generally, the number of new cases per year ranged from between 25 and 50, with the highest number of new cases occurring in 2006 (51) and the lowest occurring in 2007 and 2009 (26 each).<sup>95</sup> Without more details and information on new individuals that joined and left the program after 2001, it is difficult to analyze whether the program continued to have the same high rates of success that it enjoyed in its first three years of existence. Additionally, more information is needed to ensure that those individuals classified as successfully having disengaged and deradicalized in 2001 continued on that path or rejoined their former movements.

### *The Challenges and Failures of Exit Sweden*

As detailed above, one of the most significant challenges in judging how successful the Exit Sweden program was after its initial three-year evaluation is the lack of specific data sets. The lack of data can be traced directly to Sweden's Personal Data Act, which prevents storing detailed, sensitive data.<sup>96</sup> Non-governmental organizations, including Exit, are not allowed to “maintain a database of their former clients’ home or work addresses;”<sup>97</sup> instead, they are permitted only to use a client’s “name, birth year, and what county they are from or

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<sup>94</sup> Tore Bjørgo, Jaap van Donselaar, and Sara Grunenberg, “Exit from right-wing extremist groups: lessons from disengagement programmes in Norway, Sweden and Germany,” In *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and collective disengagement*, edited by Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan. New York: Routledge, 2009, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Anna-Lena Lodenius, “Utredning av Exit-projektet,” In *Utvärdering av EXIT – Fryshusets avhopparverksamhet: Delrapport kring insatser för unga som vill lämna grupper som använder våld och hot för att nå politiska mål*, Stockholm: Ungdomsstyrelsen (2010), 12.  
<https://www2.ungdomsstyrelsen.se/butiksadmin/showDoc/ff80808127e2ac190128babe13ef003c/w>

<sup>96</sup> Anna-Lena Lodenius, “To leave a destructive life full of hate: The Story of Exit in Sweden,” trans. Tanya Silverman, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2010), 18. <https://annalenalod.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/exit-evaluation-2010-lodenius.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Jessica Eve Stern, “X: A Case Study of a Swedish Neo-Nazi and His Reintegration into Swedish Society,” *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 32 no. 3 (May/June 2014), 440-453.

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reside in.”<sup>98</sup> This clearly presents a barrier to following up with former clients and determining how well they have maintained their disengaged status. The lack of data prevents both internal and external evaluations of the overall program and its specific parts, which could lead to changes that improve the efficacy of the program. While protecting the personal data of citizens is a noble and worthwhile goal, in this case it interferes with auditing the program and decisions on funding the program would be made with only partial, unverifiable data.

Because the program deals with sensitive topics and potentially violent situations, it is important that it is able to maintain dedicated, well-trained staff. High staff turnover was one of the main problems flagged by the 2001 BRÅ evaluation, particularly as more than half of the thirteen staff members that had been hired in the program’s first three years had left the program before the end of 2001, including all the staff members hired from July 1998 through the end of 2000.<sup>99</sup> The report points out that turnover of this magnitude is not unusual for an organization “established by committed enthusiasts”<sup>100</sup> and that their administrative inexperience is often the cause. However, high staff turnover hampered the program’s attempts to expand, and increased participation in the program – as new individuals join and existing clients continue to work through the phases – would likely exacerbate the issue. The very characteristics that give the program such credibility, particularly the presence of staff with their own experiences with far-right extremist groups can be one of the very issues that causes the program to fail because they do not have the experience to lead or manage staff. Finding a balance between the two is clearly a key in a successful continuation of the program, but it is unclear how – or if – the organization addressed this issue.

The program also had serious issues with mismanagement and misappropriation of funds. As previously discussed, the leader of the Exit Motala program had made allegations into consequences from the lack of oversight of Exit Sweden, and her allegations bore fruit in

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<sup>98</sup> Lodenius, “*To leave a destructive life full of hate: The Story of Exit in Sweden,*” 18.

<sup>99</sup> “Exit för avhoppare: En uppföljning och utvärdering av verksamheten åren 1998-2001,” 15.

<sup>100</sup> Bjørgo and Carlsson, 73.

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2002 when Kent Lindahl, one of the founders of Exit Sweden was stripped of his control over the program's funds after the disappearance of a substantial sum of money.<sup>101</sup> Lindahl was forced to pay back 60,000 Swedish Krona that had mysteriously vanished from Exit's funds – allegedly taken from the 1.6 million SEK that the program had received in government grants that year.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, material donations and technical equipment were found to be missing from the program and the combination of these issues led to an organizational shakeup whereby Exit Sweden was “reorganized under the umbrella of the Fryshuset youth foundation.”<sup>103</sup> However, this reorganization did not make substantial changes to the program to ensure that similar behaviors were not repeated or that the risks of hiring former extremists – no matter how deradicalized – were mitigated.

With the program's inability – or unwillingness – to address the risks of hiring former members of extremist groups, it is unsurprising that the Lindahl incident was not the last issue. In 2010, Anders Högström was convicted by a Polish court for the theft of the “Arbeit Macht Frei” sign from the Nazi camp at Auschwitz.<sup>104</sup> Högström had served in a leadership capacity for the Exit Motala program.<sup>105</sup> Notably, with Högström and Lindahl, the Swedish exit programs, had two high-profile failures through their use of former extremists that the Norwegian programs did not have. Clearly, not every former extremist that participated in the program committed a serious violation, it is, nevertheless, fair to question whether the inclusion of these individuals increased the risks associated with the program.

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<sup>101</sup> Peter Karlsson and Catherine Larsson, “Ledaren får inte ha hand om Exits pengar,” *Aftonbladet*, 26 February 2002. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/218Xgl/ledaren-far-inte-ha-hand-om-exits-pengar>

<sup>102</sup> *ibid*

<sup>103</sup> Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, tools and programs for countering violent extremism*, New York: Routledge (2017), 192.

<sup>104</sup> Tony Paterson, “Former neo-Nazi jailed for Auschwitz sign theft,” *Independent*, 31 December 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/former-neo-nazi-jailed-for-auschwitz-sign-theft-2172533.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Kelly Berkell, “Off-Ramp Opportunities in Material Support Cases,” *Harvard National Security Journal*, 8 issue 1 (2017), 33.

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## Conclusion

Although Norway and Sweden developed their disengagement and deradicalization programs at virtually the same time, the demographics and size of their neo-Nazi populations were vastly different and led to significant differences between the programs – though relatively similar outcomes. The age of the populations they were addressing seems to be one of the key factors in necessitating different programmatic structures – Norway’s younger population allowed for interventions focused on parental networks and discussions of future opportunities, while Sweden’s older neo-Nazi population required a five-step process built around the needs of young adults. How the program identified potential participants was also dissimilar and may be traced to the age of the population, as well. Exit Sweden required proactive outreach on the part of an individual wishing to leave far-right extremism, possibly because the group that it served were all adults and would be resistant to leaving if they were approached by outside forces. Finally, the staffing of the two programs took divergent approaches. While Norway’s program focused on professionals, like teachers, social workers, and researchers, Sweden’s program was mainly staffed and led by former members of neo-Nazi groups that had, themselves, disengaged and deradicalized. This difference in personnel can be seen in how the programs are structured and how they walk their participants through the process.

Both programs, however, are structured to address all of the needs – mental and physical – of people departing from extremist groups. Recognizing that there are often unmet needs that drive individuals to join these groups, both the Norwegian and Swedish programs help disengaged persons to realize that they can meet these needs outside of the group. Both programs place a heavy emphasis on educational and social support, which can allow individuals to become fully functioning members of society. Though there is no religious component to the far-right extremist groups, the Exit programs are constituted in a similar manner to those that address religious extremism. This is demonstrated by the expansion of

the Exit Sweden into addressing issues of asylum seekers and immigrants who are at risk of radicalization in different ways.

The available data indicates that both programs were demonstrably successful in addressing deradicalization and disengagement for their targeted populations with high success rates. However, there are lingering concerns for both programs. Because the Norwegian Exit program was short-lived, the available data on what happened to its participants is virtually non-existent. Additionally, as the program lasted for only several years and the problem of right-wing radicalism was judged to be taken care of, it seems to have left a void that has allowed the problem to once again resurface. The Norwegian government may be well served by examining if a similar program would be helpful once again. Like Norway, the evidence surrounding Exit Sweden shows very positive results, but the overall data is very limited by the country's personal data protection laws. These laws hamper efforts to follow up with individuals who have been a part of the program in the past to see if they are maintain their deradicalized status. The use of former extremists within the program has also caused significant issues in the past and a reorganization of the program did not seek to address many of these concerns.

Collectively, the Exit programs in Sweden and Norway seemed to have paved the way for deradicalization programs across the globe, and lessons can be learned from these programs, including how to tailor the programs best for populations of different ages and how the use of former extremists can build credibility for a program and entice members to leave those groups. There is certainly a need for more data on these programs, even though aspects of them may not have been in existence for more than fifteen years, as it is important to examine whether individuals who deradicalized and disengaged using these programs were able to maintain their status even after support by the program was limited or stopped completely.

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