

On the Role of Formers in Violent Extremism Tertiary Prevention Programs

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Abstract

The question of what roles, if any, former extremists can or should play in PVE efforts is one that has received increased attention in recent years. This article contributes to that conversation by collecting input from preventing violent extremism (PVE) experts we brought together in June 2023 for a full-day workshop. More specifically, our research team recruited a group of 12 US-based PVE experts—all of whom had some experience working with Formers extremists—to participate in a structured discussion about the protection, supervision, and use of formers in PVE work. The issues raised by the experts fell into four broad categories: the roles that formers have played in US PVE, the qualifications and training formers should have, the effectiveness of formers in facilitating PVE, and the ethics of their involvement. Broadly speaking, we find that PVE practitioners' support for the involvement of formers in PVE activities is heavily caveated by a range of concerns related to qualifications, training, and scope of work. Additionally, a review of the literature finds minimal support for the involvement of formers in PVE, and raises a range of ethical issues that the field has not yet fully addressed.

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Introduction

Utilizing formers is a choice. If we use them, we should consider what is gained and what is lost. What are the pluses and minuses of this choice?

Participant 8

Research focusing on former extremists has become more prevalent in recent years, with multiple papers tackling a range of former-related issues such as the process of becoming a former, the experience of being a former, and the standards that should shape the involvement of Formers in preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts (DeMichele, et. al., 2024; Meredith

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& Horgan, 2024; Clubb et. al., 2024).² A subset of this work has also grappled with the question of *if* Formers should be involved in PVE programming (Schouten, 2023; Papatheodorou, 2023). This research note attempts to advance the discussion on the *if* question by documenting the history of how Formers came to be involved in US PVE efforts, and leveraging a unique dataset to explore what types of PVE work Formers should be doing, what types of training they should have, what the evidence says about their effectiveness, and what the ethical implications of their inclusion might be.

As the history outlined below makes clear, the inclusion of Formers in US PVE efforts—and the selection of the roles that they would play—was not the result of an evidence-based decision that serves the best interests of all involved. It is, instead, the outcome of an organic process driven in large part by the Formers themselves. And these Formers, importantly, have been motivated by a wide range of reasons.³ Some may be compelled by personal reasons, choosing to remain active in the space due to feeling guilt over past extremist activities, and believing that serving as a peer mentor is a way to pay a debt to society. Others may struggle with mental wellness issues that make more traditional forms of employment untenable. Yet others may be drawn by a market that explicitly seeks, values, and rewards semi-heroic narratives of overcoming trauma and radicalization to become an active force seeking to deradicalize others. And some may choose to remain in this field as a means of achieving a degree of fame, thus meeting a need for significance and importance. Nor are all drivers personal. Some Formers may be compelled by more structural challenges, such as difficulties in securing employment (a legitimate issue for an individual whose name, when Googled, returns a slate of extremist activities).

The critical issue, however, is that even if we assume emotionally and psychologically healthy reasons for an individual's *desire* to become a Former, this does not necessarily lead

² Katerina Papatheodorou makes a compelling and useful distinction between Formers (those who have turned being a former extremist into a profession and identify) and formers (those who left the world of extremism fully behind and quietly reintegrated into society) which we adopt in this paper (Papatheodorou, 2023). Critically, the distinction is not contingent on a specific objective set of qualifications that is correlated with the work that Formers are doing. In other words, there is no requirement that a Former have any specific degree of familiarity with extremism, mandated period of desistance from such activities, or relevant training or certification. Instead, those who professionalize are Formers, and those who do not are formers.

³ A 2021 study focused on the motivations former extremists offer to explain their participation in PVE work. However, at least 7 of the 8 participants came from outside the US, complicating its relevance to the US landscape (Schewe & Koehler, 2021, p. 151).

to the conclusion that such a decision is a good one. The stories of Formers can be profoundly moving, and many PVE researchers and practitioners have professional (and personal) relationships with former extremists. It is perhaps not surprising that we may want to believe they will be effective colleagues in confronting the challenge of PVE. That said, it is notable that when asked to identify the members of a core intervention team, the experts we consulted did not include Formers in the list that they jointly constructed. Moreover, as this article makes clear, the evidence supporting the inclusion of Formers is thin, and there are reasons to believe that their inclusion may do harm.

This research note contributes to the discussion of *if* Formers should be involved in PVE by capturing inputs collected from a group of 12 US-based individuals actively engaged in PVE work. The discussion grappled with four broad issues: the roles that Formers have played in US PVE, the qualifications and training Formers should have, the effectiveness of Formers, and the ethics of Former involvement in PVE. In this note, we share their perspectives on these issues, and—through the inclusion of a historical overview of former activity in the US and a summary of relevant literatures—we add a context that was missing from the conversation itself. In other words, we seek both to summarize the concerns raised by our participants and to contextualize the issues they raised by exploring the relevant evidence base.

Methodology

In June 2023, our research team recruited a group of 12 US-based individuals—actively engaged in the work of preventing violent extremism (PVE)—to participate in a structured discussion. The individuals possessed diverse qualifications and experience, working in different settings, with different training backgrounds, and various client populations. Represented in the group were PVE program developers and directors (2 MAs and 1 PhD), social workers (1 PhD), psychologists (3 PhDs and 1 PsyD), psychiatrists (1 MD and 1 DO), licensed mental health clinicians (1 LPC), and attorneys (1 JD).⁴ The clinicians in this sample

⁴ Some individuals served in more than one role, but we wanted to avoid double-representation as this might distort the cohort. Thus we included each participant just once, citing their most relevant degree and their primary professional role.

had experience working in inpatient and outpatient settings, with adults and children, with neurodivergent and neurotypical clients, and from a trauma-informed perspective. All of them had some experience with Formers (e.g., working alongside them, appearing on panels with them). Notably, these individuals were not selected because of their experience with Formers, and they offered a range of perspectives on the productive incorporation of Formers into PVE work: some recounted negative experiences, some recounted positive experiences, and some were relatively neutral.

We sought to understand the perspective of this specific group on some of the more pernicious challenges facing the field, and in the context of this meeting, we provided the group with the following prompt:

At present, “formers” play a significant role in many tertiary prevention programs. However, this field is not the only field that uses “formers” as peer mentors; a range of substance abuse and mental health programs use formers in a variety of roles. This session will leverage the experience of participants to explore important questions related to the supervision, use, and protection of “formers” in this work.

In order to solicit input from the entire room, we used an approach that borrowed elements of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). An NGT can be described as a “structured brainstorming tool that provides an orderly procedure for obtaining qualitative and ranked information from heterogeneous participant pools” (Piltch-Loeb et. al., 2021, p 108). This approach can be especially useful when attempting to collect the input of experts or to articulate best practices when no scientific consensus on the path forward yet exists. NGT sessions have been conducted successfully in several fields, and researchers have used the NGT to help develop PVE strategy and to assess existing PVE programs (Piltch-Loeb et. al., 2021, p. 108).

NGT sessions typically utilize a four-step process:

1. **Generating Ideas:** The facilitator presents a problem to the participants and instructs them to silently and independently write down their ideas on a piece of paper.

2. Recording Ideas: Participants engage in a round-robin style session and the facilitator transcribes each idea onto a medium (e.g., a white board) that is visible to the entire group.
3. Discussing Ideas: Each idea is discussed to determine clarity and importance. The participant that generated the idea is given the opportunity to explain their rationale, and others are encouraged to question or expand upon it.
4. Voting on Ideas: Participants vote on which ideas are the most relevant and important, and these votes are tallied to identify those rated highest by the group.

In the workshop, we collected data by implementing the first three steps of this process. We allocated five minutes for participants to individually generate ideas, 15 minutes for the facilitator to record ideas, and 60 minutes for open discussion. At the end of the day, we collected the forms on which they had anonymously written their notes during the five minutes of silent brainstorming. We also had two notetakers present in the room to capture the content of the discussion.

Finally, the perspectives we heard at the workshop—particularly the concerns about the role of Formers in the field—prompted our team to wonder how the current landscape had evolved. In an effort to answer this question, we sought to trace the history of Former-led efforts in the United States. To do so, we employed a unique methodology, supplementing traditional internet research with extensive use of the Internet Archive, a non-profit digital library that we used to review previous iterations of the websites of US organizations that have included Formers in their work. The strength of this approach is that it does not rely on the faulty memories of people still working in this field. The weakness of this approach is that we have less data on newer organizations (that have shorter internet histories), and we did not have access to organizationally internal documentation regarding the roles that Formers play or how Formers are vetted. Critically, the absence of these documents should not be interpreted to mean that the organizations discussed below do not have such internal guidelines. Collecting that information was simply outside the scope of this paper (which is focused on the roles that Formers do, can, and should play, and not on the adequacy or effectiveness of the internal structures that PVE organizations have in place to scope their involvement).

Qualifications and training

There are many services that they cannot and should not do, such as risk and threat [assessment]. They minimize risk and threat and do not know how to respond to it. Nor should they be involved in any diagnosis (or recommending types of treatment) or talking about people's trauma history. So, we have issues with (1) not recognizing what they don't know—the limits of their competency—and (2) overextending their lived experiences and applying it to others.

Participant 11

Importantly, all of our participants raised concerns about the qualifications and training of Formers. These concerns broke down into four broad categories.⁵

What qualifications should a Former have?

- Formers should be able to have honest conversations about their own mental health and history with extremism (n=1).
- Formers should be able to hold empathy for someone who may say and do horrible things (n=1).

What work should Formers be doing?

- Formers could serve as role models by highlighting the path to something better or by modelling daily life for exiting individuals struggling with the work of living (n=6).
- Formers could provide exiting individuals with social support, and (when appropriate) connect them with prosocial networks (n=5).
- Formers could provide guidance on how to navigate complex systems that may be unfamiliar to exiting individuals (e.g., education, training, employment, health insurance) (n=3).

⁵ Please note that the number of individuals provided next to each suggestion indicates those who mentioned the issue independently, and should not be interpreted to mean that the remaining participants disagreed.

- Formers could provide insight regarding the challenges they faced during reintegration (n=2).
- Formers could provide insight to families struggling to understand their radicalized loved ones (n=1).
- Formers could serve as social media educators (n=1).
- Formers could advance research by sharing their stories (about both radicalization and deradicalization) with researchers (n=1).

What work should Formers not be doing?

- Formers should not engage in or replace therapeutic interventions (n=4).

Notably, in order to ensure that Formers do not engage in therapeutic interventions, they must be trained to understand when an issue has exceeded their appropriate scope of practice, so as to ensure that clinical work is passed to a licensed mental health practitioner. It is consequently not surprising that nearly all of our participants (n=10) noted the critical need for certification, though opinions differed regarding the best path forward.

What trainings/certifications should Formers be required to have?

- Some of our practitioners focused on the specific skills that a Former should have, noting that Formers should be trained to:
 - Recognize when and how to refer to a licensed mental health practitioner (n=2).
 - Set appropriate boundaries within a peer mentor relationship (n=2).
 - Have relevant cultural competency (n=2).
 - Recognize the non-generalizability of their life histories (n=1).
 - Regulate their emotions (n=1).
 - Increase their emotional intelligence, distress tolerance, and interpersonal skills (n=1).
 - Identify and assess local resources (e.g., community mental health centers) that may be of aid to exiting individuals (n=1).

- Understand the requirements of informed consent, confidentiality, and ethics (n=1).
- Recognize when they might be experiencing secondary trauma (n=1).
- Identify signs of slippage in exiting individuals (n=1).

- They also identified a number of more formal skills that could be useful:
 - Basic mental health training (e.g., recognition of warning signs) (n=1).
 - Mental health first aid training (n=1).
 - Basic risk assessment and threat assessment training (n=1).
 - Training on co-occurring substance use disorders (n=1).
 - Motivational interviewing and reflective listening (n=1).
 - Trauma-informed care training (n=1).
 - Certified health and wellness coach training (n=1).
 - Mental health peer support specialist training (n=1).
 - Forensic peer support training (n=1).

At present, there are no clear answers to these questions, and the length and variability of the lists above (particularly related to scope of work and training) suggest that we are not yet coalescing around a consensus.

In 2023, however, Life After Hate made public its organizational guidelines for utilizing Formers as peer mentors.⁶ To begin, Life After Hate differentiates between readiness and appropriateness. Regarding readiness, first and foremost, a Former must “have been disengaged from violent extremism for a period proportionate to their time and depth of their involvement in violent extremism (e.g., if actively involved in violent extremism for 5 years, peer mentors have been disengaged for a minimum of 5 years)” (Life After Hate, 2023, p. 2). A Former must also demonstrate that they are fully disengaged, deradicalized, reintegrated, and accept responsibility for their prior behaviors to serve as a peer mentor. Regarding appropriateness, Life After Hate deems an individual fit to be a peer mentor when “their desire to help others stems from altruism, rather than a desire for status, power, control, or

⁶ Life After Hate is unique in its decision to make these documents public, but other organizations may have similarly formalized guidance that simply hasn’t been published.

self-promotion” and when “they engage in opportunities for development in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are necessary to be successful as a peer mentor” (Life After Hate, 2023, p. 3). Life After Hate assesses an individual’s readiness and appropriateness to work as a peer mentor via a semi-structured interview with a multidisciplinary team.

The Life After Hate documents also make clear that the role of Formers is to strive to create prosocial relationships with their mentees and utilize self-disclosure to inspire their mentees. They also support their mentees’ disengagement and deradicalization by, for example, identifying their mentees’ “stage of change for violent extremist behavior, social networks, ideology, and identity” and utilizing motivational techniques to increase their mentees’ intrinsic motivation to change (Life After Hate, 2023, p. 9). Peer mentors assist their mentees’ reintegration into society by encouraging their development of prosocial relationships and occupational and/or educational goals, and they develop and implement individualized wellness plans for each client. Life After Hate’s guidelines also require peer mentors to abide by the National Association of Social Work ethics code, the Prevention Practitioners Network Code of Ethics, and the ExitUSA Code of Ethics. These guidelines explicitly highlight that “peer mentors are not therapists or counselors, a role that requires advanced education, training, supervised practice, and licensure” (Life After Hate, 2023, p. 12). Additionally, the organization prohibits peer mentors from engaging in “practices for which they do not have adequate education, training, or skills,” such as diagnosing their clients or providing them with therapy (Life After Hate, 2023, p. 12).

Regarding certification, a number of scholars (ourselves included) join practitioners in arguing that Formers should be trained and certified (Koehler, 2020; Papatheodorou, 2023). However, there are logistical and ethical challenges to making this happen. Logistically, the reality is that there is no research demonstrating what certification—if any—would result in a Former population that is more effective at PVE work. In the absence of such guidelines, individuals and organizations are able to choose from a wide range of trainings to prepare them for the work of peer mentorship. We are aware, for example, of one former who was certified as a substance abuse and mental health counselor; one who is a forensic peer mentor (and a certified peer specialist with a focus on mental health); and one who does not appear to have any formal certifications. Ethically, it is worth considering that encouraging former

extremists to complete such professional training may result in further linking their identities to their extremist pasts. In the Radicalization Awareness Network's (RAN, 2017) guidelines for employing Formers, it is recommended that Formers both (1) receive professional training and (2) avoid creating an identity out of their past. And yet, Koehler (2020) appropriately highlights that those who are trained are more likely to see themselves as "professional Formers."

The effectiveness of Formers

Not every former will make a good peer support specialist.

Participant 2

Assessing the effectiveness of Formers is contingent upon identifying the specific roles that they should play. At present, those roles are varied and (both formally and informally) unregulated, and relatively little work asks the question of whether their involvement is effective. RAN's report describes both the advantages and the challenges of working with Formers, with the overall takeaway being in favor of utilizing Formers (RAN, 2017). The rationale is twofold: "Formers are viewed as 'experts', having personal experience of (de-)radicalisation processes. Moreover, the same experience renders so-called Formers credible to the target group of PVE/CVE activities" (RAN, 2017, p. 1). Many policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and Formers share this view: Formers possess unique knowledge of extremist milieus, personal experience relevant to detecting and countering radicalization, and strong credibility among extremist and non-extremist populations (Koehler et al., 2023). However, much of the extant international literature supporting the use of Formers in PVE consists of anecdotal evidence (RAN, 2017; Hedayah, 2017; Scrivens et al., 2022). Drawing on case studies, for example, Belanger and Szmania (2018) assert that the effectiveness of Formers in tertiary interventions has shown "limited but promising outcomes," particularly in one-on-one online interventions and disengagement mentoring for white supremacists (p. 1466).

Reviewing this literature, Koehler (2020) questions the widely held assumption that Formers' lived experience gives them inherent expertise or credibility. Indeed, he aptly calls attention to the "essentially non-existing" quantitative data supporting the effectiveness of Formers within PVE (Koehler, 2020, p. 16). Moreover, although his intent is not to diminish Formers' voices and perspectives, he suggests that "applying the wrong methods and tools [...] can have significant negative consequences and bears the risk of increasing dangers instead of mitigating them" (Koehler, 2020, p. 19). Therefore, he posits that it is "risky," "unprofessional," and unethical for the field of PVE to rely on Formers with little empirical evidence supporting this approach (Koehler, 2020, p. 19).

In a similar vein, Papatheodorou notes that lived experience does not necessarily equal expertise, and that it is a "dangerous" and "gross overestimation" to equate the two (2023, p. 219, 217). When Formers derive their expertise only from their lived experience, rather than additional education, training, and certification, they may generalize their experience to all extremists or, worse yet, "dabble in topics they not only lack expertise in but also lack experience in" (Papatheodorou, p. 219). Even when Formers claim expertise in their former group or ideology, the individualized nature of deradicalization and disengagement trajectories makes it likely that their experience will not apply to others. Furthermore, since the extremist landscape is constantly changing, the relevance of a Formers' lived experience has an expiration date. Yet, some Formers who disengaged years ago still claim expertise on current and future extremism (Feuer, 2022).

Our participants echoed these concerns. Participant 7 noted that "*they are an N of 1, they should be closely monitored and supervised, and they should be aware that their story is not Truth (with a capital T).*" And in the context of our discussion, Participant 11 responded:

You used the term "n of 1", and I don't think we paid enough attention to that. I think we've gotten into the mode of "send me the extremist" or "send me the former." We almost dehumanize them. But they all have different stories, and they come from so many different backgrounds. Within each ideology too, there is just so much complexity and we minimize that. And there's a difference between formers who engaged in extremist violence versus those who subscribed to extremist ideology.

Unfortunately, there appear to be very few studies that empirically evaluate the effectiveness of PVE efforts involving Formers, and those we identified focus on primary prevention instead of on the tertiary prevention efforts being examined in this article. In Germany, Walsh and Gansewig (2019) assessed the effectiveness of a school-based primary prevention tool designed and administered by a Former, and found minimal benefits and potential risks. Although the students in the intervention group perceived the Former as credible, the intervention did not significantly affect extremist attitudes or delinquency as intended. Furthermore, the authors noted that the Former's language and demeanor was inappropriate for the target age group, and some students reported feeling uncomfortable. And in Denmark, Parker and Lindekilde (2020) conducted a randomized controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of a primary prevention project involving Formers. The survey-based evaluation, however, yielded mixed results: although the intervention successfully reduced perceived legitimacy of political violence, it also elicited the unintended consequence of decreasing political tolerance. Finally, in a recent review of the literature, Gansewig and Walsh (2022) identified four primary program evaluations involving Formers, including the two aforementioned German and Danish studies, as well as two older quasi-experimental studies conducted in Ireland and the Basque Country (see Emerson et al., 2014 and Garaigordobil, 2012 for more details). The review further supports Koehler's (2020) position: "the empirical evidence showed a contrast to the anecdotal evidence, which mostly provided a positive assessment of former extremists in school settings" (p. 1). Finally, in systematically reviewing the evidence on the impact of Formers in secondary and tertiary interventions, Morrison et al. (2021) found that "no study has yet provided a clear-cut impact evaluation of the effectiveness of formers" (p. 6).

A related line of research has focused on the assumption that Formers are inherently more credible than other messengers among both the general population and extremist milieus. In a 2023 study, Koehler et al. found that both the general population and those who self-reported sympathy for extremist causes perceived Formers as "neither credible nor lacking credibility" (Koehler et al., 2023, p. 1). Conversely, police officers were perceived as the most credible among both groups, indicating that Formers may not be the most effective messenger of counter-messages. That said, Bélanger et al. (2020) found contradictory results

on the credibility of former extremists in a large sample of American Muslims. In this study, results indicated that the content of a counter-message had far greater impact on its effectiveness than the messenger of the content. That said, in contrast to Koehler et al. (2023), this study also found the ISIS defector was the most effective messenger. However, when the defector delivered the social argument against supporting ISIS (i.e., “ISIS have committed unspeakable acts of cruelty against innocent people”), the counter-message backfired (p. 4). In other words, although Formers may be effective in certain contexts, they are not always the most effective messenger, and their involvement invites additional risk.

Thus despite Formers’ perceived legitimacy in PVE efforts, there is minimal evidence supporting their involvement, and almost no evidence supporting their involvement in secondary or tertiary intervention.

Moreover, there are reasons to doubt not only their qualifications (even as experts in the movements to which they belonged), but also the generalizability and relevance of their life histories. We note, for example, that Formers represent a staggeringly small percentage of those who deradicalize and/or disengage from extremism. In fact, *most* of the people who leave extremism behind are formers (with a lowercase f), those who quietly reintegrate into society. Thus Formers may, in fact, be poor examples of the path forward as their histories with extremism remain salient parts of their daily lives.

Ethical considerations

I met [him] because he was on the circuit. I thought how tough are these people? They are making a livelihood out of the most antisocial part of their life and they may not be fully aware of the risk or effects associated. They need support, consent, and clinical support before. Also...we need to make it super clear to Formers that this is their job—they are employed as professionals—and that that the people they hopefully help are not their friends.

Participant 8

Papatheodorou (2023) also raises the question of ethics by arguing that it is unethical that Formers “are being rewarded for having once been racist, xenophobic, or hateful” (p. 217).

Indeed, several Formers have successfully monetized their past to the extent that they have talent agents to arrange their tours, book deals, and speaking arrangements (Koehler, 2020). Others are rewarded not monetarily, but with validation and a niche sort of fame by participating in what Participant 8 referred to as “the circuit” (i.e., serving on panels and making presentations at gatherings such as Eradicate Hate and Canadian Megaweek). These types of external reward not only encourage Formers to work in PVE for the wrong reasons, but may also create “competition among Formers on who has the most tragic past” to attract the most public attention (Papatheodorou, 2023, p. 217). In doing so, Formers may be motivated to exaggerate their past or frame it within a victimhood narrative for greater public sympathy, which may skew public perceptions regarding extremism and misinform policy design or implementation.

Within our group, the ethics of Formers working in PVE was raised by over half of our participants. As a group, however, they raised a different set of issues. Namely, instead of focusing on the ethics of rewarding former extremists, our group wondered whether or not being a Former was a psychologically healthy choice.

What if we are hurting Formers?

- The work of being a Former compels a person to remain linked to the most antisocial part of their life, which ultimately harm Formers (n=3).
- Formers may struggle with mental health issues as a result of their involvement in PVE (n=2).
- A Former might return to extremism, which has implications not just for the exiting individuals that the Former is mentoring, but also for the Former themselves (n=3).

We might be helping Formers

- There is literature demonstrating that *being a sponsor* in Alcoholics Anonymous (i.e., serving as a peer mentor to someone who has made less progress towards recovery) is correlated with improved outcomes (n=1).

To the best of our knowledge, there have been no studies on the impacts of PVE peer mentorship on Formers. The literature on being a sponsor within Alcoholics Anonymous does suggest a benefit. One study, for example, found that “those who were helping [others recover from alcohol] were significantly less likely to relapse in the year following treatment [compared to those not sponsoring others], independent of the number of AA meetings attended” (Pagano et al., 2004). Another found that *having a sponsor* was not correlated with alcohol or narcotic abstinence over a one-year period, but that *being a sponsor* was “strongly associated with substantial improvements in sustained abstinence rates, even after controlling for involvement with community organizations, NA/AA meeting attendance, marital status, employment, participation in drug and alcohol treatment centers, and HIV status (Crape et al., 2002). Research is necessary to investigate the relevance of this finding for PVE work, but if the same pattern is applied to PVE, it raises the question of who the client is in an organization employing Formers as peer mentors: the individual seeking assistance in exiting (who may not necessarily benefit from having a peer mentor), or the Former serving as a peer mentor (who may benefit from being a peer mentor without necessarily helping their mentees)?

In the meantime, we believe that Formers in the PVE community serve in roles more similar to those of “street outreach workers,” the term used in gang desistance literature to describe former gang members (as well as other interventionists) actively engaged in helping others leave gangs (Cheng, 2017; Pyrooz et al., 2023). Although street outreach interventions have operated in the United States for decades, relatively little research explores the effects of engaging in this work. That said, among the scant research that exists, there are some compelling findings on how this work can negatively impact those who do it.

Street outreach workers, also referred to as “violence interrupters” and “violence interventionists,” are typically individuals who work and reside in communities affected by gang involvement, drug use, and high rates of incarceration, many of whom possess lived experience as former gang members (Decker et al., 2008). Decker and colleagues (2008) suggest that street outreach workers primarily aim to “link at-risk or gang-involved youth to services and pro-social activities” and “engage in activities with youth to learn about and

disrupt violence” (p. 4). Depending on the case, street outreach workers strive to prevent, intervene, or respond to incidents of community violence.

Research on street outreach workers suggests that the population frequently experiences traumatic stress in the context of their work. Free and MacDonald (2019), for example, conducted semi-structured interviews with 37 street outreach workers to identify the occupational hazards of street outreach work. Importantly, though the sample reported a range of firsthand traumatic experiences that Formers do not experience in their work (e.g., being a victim of violence, witnessing violence and death, handling dead bodies), the researchers concluded that “for the majority of participants, the most challenging part of their work surrounded learning about the traumatic loss of their client,” highlighting how these individuals are particularly at risk for exposure to secondary post-traumatic stress (STS) (Free & MacDonald, 2019, p. 1203).⁷ A follow-up study by Free and MacDonald (2022) sought to understand the psychological, behavioral, and social consequences of street outreach work. To address this question, the researchers re-interviewed the 37 outreach workers they recruited for their previous 2019 study. “Many” individuals—the authors do not provide frequencies—described the psychological toll of their work, associating words like “hurt,” “pain,” “loss,” “surreal,” “frustrating,” “angry,” and “numb” with work (Free & MacDonald 2022, p. 292). Additionally, “some” individuals in this sample described negative behavioral tendencies, including substance use and avoidance behaviors, to cope with their emotions and attributed weakened or fractured intimate relationships to their work-related stress.

Johnson and Everson (2022) further this research by demonstrating how street outreach work may actually preclude rehabilitation for ex-offenders and former gang members. The operating assumption, they note, is that civic engagement can foster prosocial connections, promote a positive identity transformation, and, in turn, lead to desistance from crime. In their study, Johnson and Everson questioned this assumption by interviewing 40 violence interrupters, 15 of whom were no longer actively engaged in this work. Nearly every individual (active and inactive interrupters) reported that their desire for rehabilitation and desistance from crime was their primary motivator to engage in street outreach work, hoping the organization would provide them some accountability. However, only 25% (n =10) of this

⁷ Secondary post-traumatic stress (STS) refers to a stress response following exposure to another person’s trauma that closely parallels the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

sample reported having found a deep purpose and a new social identity from their work. On the other end of the spectrum, 15% (n=6) were fired for criminal behavior and 30% (n=12) expressed significant disillusionment with the organization, their training, and compensation, which motivated six interrupters to quit. These results may have limited generalizability because the sample was small, but they undermine the operating assumption that this type of work is beneficial and positive.

The comparison of PVE Formers to gang-desistance street outreach workers is obviously imperfect. Formers serving as peer mentors are not working and residing in extremist communities, and are thus not witness to the kinds of violence that street outreach workers regularly see. That said, Formers—particularly those who are engaged for speaking events (to include testimony before Congress)—are often asked to publicly recount personal traumas that will be reported on by local, regional, or national media organizations. In fact, the PVE speakers circuit suggests that Formers’ stories are more valued when they dwell on previous trauma and extremist behavior, than when they focus on current intervention work. This market has, in fact, been described by some as a “trauma porn” industry (a derivative, perhaps, of Tom Wolfe’s 1967 term “pornoviolence,” used to describe the graphic representations of violence used by media organizations to attract viewers). Thus, while the data on harm to Formers is limited, the research on street outreach work should minimally compel us to ask whether Formers are vulnerable to a similar slate of potential harms.

The history of Formers in US PVE

There is no operational definition for “former,” which is problematic. It’s fine to talk about what they can do, and who they can be within teams and organizations, but we also need to discuss the qualifications that make them suitable to be doing this work in the first place.

Participant 6

The issues raised by our participants prompted the question of how the current landscape had come to be. That is, former extremists have actively contributed to US PVE efforts for many years, but it was not clear how this had occurred. Was this an intentional decision? Who had

initiated the inclusion of Formers? What roles had Formers played over the years? To answer these questions, we sought to understand the history of Former involvement in US PVE efforts. In doing so, it became clear that the current involvement of Formers was not the result of an intentional decision by experts and policy-makers. Instead, it appears to be an artifact of a tangled history that can, in some ways, be traced to the beginning of the 20th century.

Pre-PVE

The UK has been doing some really great stuff with what they call “experts by lived experience.” I’ve always hoped that the US would adopt a similar model. The one question we haven’t asked is who qualifies for this term “former”? What makes someone eligible or potentially good at this role?

Participant 6

The US government, and a wide range of non-governmental organizations, have worked with “experts by lived experience” to inform policy and practice for over 100 years (Skelton-Wilson et. al., 2021, p. 2). In some cases, this work has involved consulting those with lived experience in order to better understand how to address a challenge or help an at-risk population. In other cases, the individuals themselves—that is, those with the lived experiences—have played direct roles in helping others facing similar challenges. Perhaps most well-known, individuals who have experienced substance use disorder can serve as peer support (or sponsors) helping to assist others who are struggling with the challenge of addiction. But the presence of peer support—formally or informally—is hardly limited to this single issue. Peer mentors can be found in a staggering range of fields, including chronic disease management, mental wellness, child and maternal health, and violence prevention (Fortuna, et. al., 2022, p. 572). In fact, partly due to changing norms and beliefs around the causes and potential remedies for violence, beginning in the 1930s, efforts to reduce street violence began to promise services rather than threatening punishment, and former gang members were recruited to play a role in the provision of these services (Cheng, 2017, p. 43).

Former extremists have been actively engaged in PVE work for years, particularly in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Koehler, 2020). In the United States, their involvement is to some degree the natural outgrowth of the country’s century-long history of

leveraging those with lived experience to help those who are vulnerable or at risk (of addiction, of chronic disease, of committing violence, of radicalizing, etc.).

As Papatheodorou (2023) documents, Formers currently contribute to primary prevention initiatives, such as counter-narratives or educational lectures, that raise public awareness and resilience to extremism (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021; Parker & Lindekilde, 2020; Gansewig & Walsh 2023).⁸ They have also been involved in secondary and tertiary prevention initiatives, including aiding law enforcement agencies, offering deradicalization and disengagement services (Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Papatheodorou, 2023), and contributing to peacebuilding initiatives (Ashour, 2009; Clubb, 2016, 2017; El-Said, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2015; Murua, 2017). Some Formers have gained significant fame through writing autobiographies, appearing in TED talks and on TV shows recounting their experience, testifying before Congress, and offering input on key policy issues surrounding extremism (Koehler, 2020). Commenting on the presence of Formers within the PVE space, Koehler suggests that the field has created “a sphere of ‘professional formers’” those who rely on their extremist past for employment, career, and status (Koehler, 2020, p. 16).

In the United States, the involvement of Formers in PVE can be traced to a 2009 blog, but the more significant event is a 2011 summit in Dublin.

The SAVE Summit

In June 2011, Google Ideas, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Tribeca Film Festival hosted the Summit Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) in Dublin (Google YouTube, 2012, 0:02; Juginovic, 2013; Stern, 2012). The summit—attended by one of the authors—brought together an international cast of roughly 80 former extremists, including former gang members, right-wing extremists, and Islamists, as well as survivors of extremism, academics, and public and private sector stakeholders. SAVE’s primary goal was to initiate a dialogue on preventing young people from radicalizing, and rehabilitating those already radicalized. One of the key takeaways from this dialogue was the necessity for stakeholder collaboration, resulting in the creation of a global network called Against Violent Extremism (AVE). The

⁸ Primary prevention efforts focus on building community and individual resilience to radicalization; secondary prevention efforts are designed to disrupt the process of radicalization before someone engages in violent activity; tertiary preventions target those who have already mobilized to violence.

Institute of Strategic Dialogue described AVE’s core mission as encouraging cooperation and information sharing among key stakeholders and assisting in the global effort against violent extremism (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024). In 2013, the network consisted of 154 former extremists (Juginovic, 2013); as of early 2021, the network comprised 309 former extremists (Against Violent Extremism, 2021). According to the Internet Archive, however, the AVE website was taken down around September 2021 for no specified reason.

SAVE also catalyzed Former-led PVE efforts in the United States. At the summit, a group of American former extremists—including Sammy Rangel, Angela King, Arno Michaelis, Christian Picciolini, Tony McAleer, and Frank Meeink—met and subsequently founded Life After Hate in August 2011 (Life After Hate, 2024).⁹ Life After Hate’s initial mission was to “demonstrate the primal, basic goodness of humanity” (Life After Hate, 2011) through featuring stories on their website relating to peace and love, conducting outreach and speaking engagements for schools and community organizations related to extremism, and raising awareness about extremism through their publishing arm, *la Prensa* (i.e. “the press”) (Life After Hate, 2012). Life After Hate was the first NGO operated by Formers in the United States, and remained the only NGO founded by or employing Formers in the United States for several years. Subsequent NGOs involving Formers in the United States include Parents For Peace (founded in 2015), Parallel Networks (founded in 2017), the Free Radicals Project (founded in 2018), and Beyond Barriers (founded in 2020). The following sections sketch the histories of Former involvement in US PVE NGOs by describing how and why these organizations were founded, how Formers were initially involved, and how the mission and usage of Formers evolved over time.

Life After Hate

Life After Hate was registered as a non-profit organization in late 2011 (after the SAVE conference). Before this, though, Arno Michaelis and Christian Picciolini—both of whom were former members of the white power movement—operated a blog under the same

⁹ In August, 2011, the United States federal government also released its first national strategy to prevent domestic violent extremism, a strategy called “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States.” Based on the available open-source material, it is unclear whether SAVE prompted the release or informed the content of this strategy.

name (Life After Hate, 2009). Their blog was not limited to stories related to extremism; it was “a venue where anyone concerned with racial and social issues can speak their mind and contribute to the overall theme of peace” (Life After Hate, 2009). In late 2011, the Life After Hate blog became more focused on PVE, presumably to reflect the focus of the new organization of the same name. Life After Hate's initial staff and board consisted almost exclusively of former extremists, with Michaelis at the helm as executive director. In addition to its blog, Life After Hate began offering speaking engagements and publishing online materials related to extremism. King explains that Life After Hate was born from their shared “desire to make the transition from violent extremist back to citizen a smoother one for those who would come after us [i.e., future generations of deradicalizing extremists]” (King, 2021).

Life After Hate expanded its PVE service portfolio over the next several years. In late 2012, McAleer assumed the role of executive director when Michaelis departed the organization; McAleer and King were the only listed staff on the website at the time (Life After Hate, 2024). Under their direction, Life After Hate implemented PVE consultancy services as of late 2013 (Life After Hate, 2013) and disengagement services as of early 2014 (ExitUSA, 2015). An updated mission statement reflected these changes, framing the organization as a “non-profit consultancy and speakers bureau dedicated to helping organizations gain the knowledge necessary to implement long-term solutions that counter all types of violent extremism and terrorism” (Life After Hate, 2013). The consultancy services advertised on the website included (a) education and training, (b) consultative assessments, (c) collaborative problem-solving, (d) motivational public speaking, (e) project management, (f) curricula development, and (g) expert witness testimony for a wide variety of public and private sector clients (Life After Hate, 2013).

By early 2014, McAleer and King had launched ExitUSA, a program within the Life After Hate parent organization via which individuals leaving the white power movement can receive services (ExitUSA, 2015). Around its inception, the ExitUSA website indicated that it was “founded and run by former hate group members” and utilized “a variety of strategies, including public awareness campaigns, individualized education and job training programs, and leveraging strategic community partnerships” to help its exiting clients (ExitUSA, 2015). Importantly, the role of Formers at Life After Hate has diminished over time. The current

CEO and executive director of Life After Hate, Patrick Riccards, does not have an extremist background. Moreover, former extremists no longer oversee the work done by the organization. They are involved, instead, as peer mentors within a multidisciplinary team including psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement (Life After Hate, 2023). That said, Life After Hate no longer lists its staff on its website; therefore, it is unclear how many former extremists currently work for the organization

Parents For Peace

In 2015, after the violent radicalization of their son and brother, Melvin Bledsoe and his daughter Monica Holley founded Parents For Peace (P4P) to help families affected by extremism. Relative to Life After Hate, the Internet Archive provided limited information about P4P, especially around the time of the organization's founding. Currently, the organization's mission is to "empower families to address the radicalization of a loved one" by providing a helpline and subsequent interventions, raising public awareness, and advocating for effective policy solutions to extremism (Parents for Peace, 2024a). No former extremists are on the senior staff, but Michaelis is a board member, and there are currently two former extremists working for the organization (Michaelis, a former white supremacist, and a former Islamist). Modelled off of other mental health helplines, P4P's helpline supports individuals of concern as well as their friends and family members. Once an individual utilizes the helpline and completes a brief intake process, P4P offers two types of interventions, direct and indirect, both of which aim to address "the core issues driving the [individual of concern's] initial turn to extremism" (Parents for Peace, 2024b). In indirect intervention sessions, the family and loved ones work with interventionists to develop knowledge and a toolbox to support the person they are concerned about, whereas direct intervention sessions involve the person of concern directly engaging with interventionists. Notably, P4P's multidisciplinary interventionist team has included Formers since its inception in 2017, who work alongside experts in coaching, social work, psychology, and law enforcement (Parents for Peace, 2024a). The organization specifies that these Formers, dubbed "Exit Peer Specialists," "provide invaluable peer support to those at risk" (Parents for Peace, 2024a). Unfortunately, there is no publicly available information related to the

organization's guidelines for employing Formers, or how Formers specifically provide "peer support" to clients.

Parallel Networks

Jesse Morton, a former Islamist, and Mitch Silber, former Director of Intelligence Analysis at the NYPD, co-founded Parallel Networks in 2017. Although Silber monitored Morton's extremist activity for several years, and helped arrest him in 2011, the pair developed a strong relationship once Morton deradicalized and shared a desire to help counter violent extremism (Parallel Networks, 2023). The original mission of Parallel Networks, which guided the organization until Morton's death in late 2021, was to create an "alternative network opposed to everything polarizing, extremist, and hateful" by contributing to initiatives and providing services to prevent and counter violent extremism (Parallel Networks, 2018a). In early 2018, these services included consulting related to PVE, motivational talks, presenting at conferences, and a series of PVE initiatives, including Light Upon Light (Parallel Networks, 2018b). Through 2021, Morton was also developing a peer-to-peer intervention for radicalized American Muslims called "Naseeha," though it appears to have fallen wayside as a result of Morton's passing (Parallel Networks, 2020; Kenosha News, 2021).

Following Morton's death, Parallel Networks provided an expanded portfolio of programs under the direction of Ryan LoRee, a former neo-nazi who served as a program director and interventionist at the organization. Light Upon Light, for example, grew to offer "support at every level of the public health/social service spectrum: from early education, to prevention, harm reduction, research, countering extremist narratives, one-on-one interventions, disengagement and deradicalization programming, and reintegration and rehabilitation for criminal offenders" (Parallel Networks, 2024). Other programs aimed to provide skills and resources to local stakeholders and create communities of practice dedicated to CVE. LoRee and his team of interventionists (none of whom, besides LoRee, are former extremists) delivered these programs. Like P4P, Parallel Networks has not published specific information on their intervention services, nor did their website specify whether their

interventionists possessed formal qualifications. Parallel Networks is, moreover, no longer operating under this name.

Free Radicals Project

In addition to co-founding Life After Hate, Christian Picciolini later founded the Free Radicals Project in 2018. Unfortunately, we could not access the archival versions of Life After Hate's website during 2018, so we cannot identify whether Picciolini was still involved with Life After Hate when he founded the Free Radicals Project. However, by early 2019, the Life After Hate website no longer listed Picciolini as a board member, suggesting his departure from the organization (Life After Hate, 2019). Picciolini initially described the Free Radicals Project as “a global disengagement platform that aids individuals, and their families or communities, in exiting hateful and violence-based extremism through a non-aggressive, community-led approach of individual resilience-building, reconnection, cross-cultural immersion, and making amends” (Free Radicals Project, 2019). The archived copy of the Free Radicals Project website does not specify the organization's size nor who the interventionists are (beyond Picciolini himself). It is clear, however, that Picciolini funded the project for the most part with his own resources (Borchers & Hagan, 2021). In November 2021, Picciolini released a statement on his personal website explaining his decision to close the project, which he claimed had helped hundreds of individuals successfully disengage (Picciolini, 2021). Picciolini discussed how the project was not sustainable economically and how his “years of being exposed to toxic hatred and violence—both from my own past, and what I've absorbed from the hundreds of people I've worked with” had impacted his psychological well-being (Picciolini, 2021). Picciolini's reasoning, importantly, raises questions regarding whether being a peer counselor to other exiting extremists is psychologically beneficial (or even neutral) to former extremists engaged in this work.

Beyond Barriers

Finally, Jeff Schoep founded Beyond Barriers in early 2020, almost two years after stepping down from his role as the commander of the National Socialist Movement (NSM; which touts itself as the largest neo-nazi group in the United States), an organization he had

been affiliated with for two and a half decades (Sines v. Kessler, 2020). The New York Times had described Schoep as “America’s poster boy for Nazism,” and Schoep had described himself as having been America’s “most notorious neo-nazi” (Eligon, 2020; Beyond Barriers, 2024a). According to Schoep, he began questioning his neo-nazi beliefs as early as 2016 after developing positive relationships with Daryl Davis, a black musician, and Deeyah Khan, a Muslim filmmaker. In March 2019, Schoep stepped down as commander of NSM. In August 2019, he announced on his personal website that he had severed ties with the movement to become “a positive, peaceful influence of change and understanding” with a “mission to help end the violence caused by extremism and radicalization” (Schoep, 2019). He rebranded himself on his website as a public speaker, peace advocate, extremism consultant, and human and civil rights advocate and encouraged extremists to contact him for disengagement services. Beyond Barriers, according to Schoep, is a non-profit organization “dedicated to helping people leave extremist organizations as well as providing support and connections to individuals and communities affected by extremism” (Schoep, 2020).

Schoep still serves as the president of Beyond Barriers, where he and his staff continue to conduct extremism prevention and intervention work (Beyond Barriers, 2024b). Notably, of Schoep’s 13 staff, five individuals are former extremists, and four of them left NSM along with Schoep circa 2019 (Beyond Barriers, 2024b). The organization does not specify what its intervention service entails, though it does indicate that former extremists work as interventionists, and that a psychiatrist with experience in violent extremism serves as the “intervention supervisor.” It is unclear, however, what professional criteria (i.e., training, certification) Beyond Barriers requires for their former extremist interventionists.

Conclusion and recommendations

Research on former extremists has become more prevalent in recent years, marking a relative explosion in published material on the topic. In 2024 alone multiple papers and a book were published (Clubb et. al., 2024). One article used in-depth interviews to shed light on the process of *becoming* a former. It explored the social process of deradicalization and disengagement—focusing on three stages: having initial doubts, seeking alternative roles, and

experiencing turning points—with a particular emphasis on the ways in which a shifting hierarchy of role identities can precipitate exit from an extremist movement (DeMichele, et. al., 2024, p. 4). Another described an exploratory study that relied on interviews and focus groups to improve understanding of the specific stressors that extremists face when trying to rejoin mainstream society (Meredith & Horgan, 2024). The article ultimately identified nearly 100 distinct stressors that could be grouped into four broad categories: daily life and social, psychological and physical well-being, safety and consequences, and transition and identity.

Simultaneous to this increase in research on the topic, the *Involving Formers* project has sought to articulate a set of voluntary global standards by facilitating a series of dialogues and consensus-building activities by bringing together practitioners and academics from a wide range of environments (Clubb et. al., 2024). The work itself is predicated on the reality that Formers are involved in PVE, and that—in the absence of evidence-based research on whether they should be involved—the most responsible course of action is that of establishing a set of standards designed to ensure that their involvement does no harm.

The questions explored in this work, focused on the process of becoming a former and the safeguards necessary to ensure that formers involved in PVE do not harm, are critical to advancing the field. In addition to this, though, there is an equally critical need for robust research on the effectiveness and impact of Formers' participation in PVE work.

- **Researchers should build the evidence base on the effectiveness of Formers (and formers) in PVE:** Establishing a set of baseline standards is important. It is also important, though, to establish an evidence base both on the effectiveness of Formers and on the impact that such work might have on Formers. Most of the information available is anecdotal, and the reality is that reputation-management—particularly in an environment in which most funding comes from government and private grants—influences the stories that PVE organizations share. As a result, success stories proliferate while misfires are whispered quietly. The best way to rectify this situation is by growing the evidence base. Critically, growing the research base benefits PVE organizations regardless of its outcome as findings can be used to justify the inclusion of Formers and/or shape their involvement.

- **Researchers should explore the impact of PVE work on Formers (and formers):** Researchers have started to explore the toll that PVE work takes on professionals working in this space, but there are reasons to believe that the risk to Formers may be both unique and disproportionate (Muibu et. al., 2024). Preliminary work in this space has already begun, as a 2024 article explored the stressors faced by extremists attempting to reintegrate into mainstream society (Meredith & Horgan, 2024). That said, additional research is critical, because Formers are entitled to know if this type of work is likely to harm them so that they can make informed decisions about their involvement.

In the meantime, we believe there are four simple precautions that should be implemented by all PVE organizations:

- **Formers should be assessed by a licensed mental health practitioner:** As Participant 2 noted, Formers are on their “own mental health journ[ies] and [an assessment of their] suitability to help those in crisis [should be] required in addition to training.” Assessments should be undertaken in a manner careful not to stigmatize would-be Formers, but in recognition of the reality that many Formers have experienced significant trauma (either before their radicalization, or as a result of their participation in an extremist movement), and that the work of being a peer mentor is likely to raise issues that may be triggering.
- **Formers should be supervised by a trained clinician:** Supervision by a licensed mental health provider is a critical backstop because this person can provide ongoing guidance to the Former regarding their appropriate scope of work, and intervene if the exiting individual begins to raise issues that require professional intervention (e.g., threats of suicide) or if the Former begin to struggle or relapse. Moreover, six of the practitioners who participated in our workshop were explicit on this issue.

- **Formers should be required to obtain appropriate training and certification:**
Unfortunately, our participants identified a lengthy list of skills, trainings, and certifications that they thought were appropriate and necessary for Formers working in PVE. The reality is that these lists are prohibitively long, with little consensus (or even overlap) on what the most important trainings and certifications are. That said, there is clear consensus that training is critical, so individuals and organizations working with Formers should minimally require some formal training (e.g., mental health first aid and some type of peer support certification) for Formers involved in PVE.
- **Presentations by Formers should focus on recovery and post-recovery activities:**
When asking a Former to speak at a conference, we should ask them to scope their presentations in terms of their recovery and peer mentorship work (instead of requesting presentations that foreground “trauma porn”). As Participant 13 noted of one Former: “Lived experience is not what makes him a good mentor. His lived *recovery* experience is: how he got out and all of the good things he’s done [are] the most important [parts of his story].”

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