Unusual Suspects

Overlooked avenues for the prevention of recruitment into non-state armed groups

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1. Introduction

When discussing why individuals join non-state armed groups, practitioners often refer to factors such as poverty, unemployment, and ideological indoctrination. As a result, many recruitment prevention efforts focus on counter-narratives and job creation. In contrast, this Policy Brief highlights three overlooked factors: situational avoidance, defection from non-state armed groups, and sensation seeking. These factors open up creative avenues for the prevention of voluntary and/or forced recruitment, including opportunities for situational prevention, links to the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV), and programs for non-violent sensation seeking. Practitioners should examine these (and other) overlooked factors and incorporate them into national strategies and action plans. They should also explore links between recruitment prevention efforts and programs that provide support to ex-combatants.

2. Risk and Protective Factors for Recruitment

Why do some individuals join non-state armed groups while others do not? To answer this question, between October 2024 and February 2025, New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) conducted a review of the academic and policy literature on armed violence.[1] Funded by the UK Government, this literature review identified risk and protective factors for recruitment into non-state armed groups engaged in intra-state armed conflict[2] and/or violent extremism.[3] As defined by the project, factors that increase the likelihood of recruitment are risk factors. Conversely, factors that decrease the likelihood of recruitment are protective factors.[4] Protective factors are sometimes the opposite of risk factors—for example, if impulsivity is associated with an increased risk of recruitment, then higher levels of self-control may be protective.[5] However, protective factors can also be conceptually distinct from risk factors. For example, if religiosity is a protective factor for recruitment, then having no religious commitments does not necessarily pose a risk.[6]

Risk factors for recruitment are commonly referred to as "push and pull" factors in the policy literature. Commonly mentioned push factors include poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, whereas commonly mentioned pull factors include ideological indoctrination, vengeance, and material inducements.[7] Many individuals may be subject to the same push and pull factors; however, not all of these individuals join non-state armed groups. To explain why some individuals are recruited and others are not, attention to protective factors is also required.

Protective factors help explain why some individuals resist different pressures to join non-state armed groups. However, these factors typically receive less attention in the policy and academic literature.[8] The factors currently identified as protective in existing research include having no existing social ties to armed groups; having familial responsibilities (i.e., having to take care of younger siblings); being embedded in a social network that disapproves of armed groups; having alternative income generating opportunities; and having a strong sense of what is morally acceptable due to strong religious values and/or beliefs in non-violence.[9]

In the following section, this policy brief outlines three factors not commonly examined by practitioners as part of recruitment prevention efforts. Two of these factors (defection and sensation seeking) have been highlighted in recent academic

work and have not yet been addressed in the policy literature. The other factor (situational avoidance) is mentioned in numerous anecdotal reports across a wide range of policy documents. However, this factor is not explicitly identified as a protective factor in either policy or academic work.

3. Three Overlooked Risk and Protective Factors

3.1. Situational avoidance (protective factor)

Civilians sometimes flee their village, town, or country to protect themselves from recruitment (the "flight" response).[10] However, other civilians are left behind, either because they do not wish to leave their homes or because they are unable to flee. As numerous reports across the policy literature illustrate, individuals who stay behind often try to avoid situations that put them at risk of recruitment in their daily lives.

For example, following an incident of forced recruitment at Kituku market in Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, civilian men stopped frequenting the market, leaving women to carry on local trade.[11] Civilians also take other evasive measures, such as sleeping outside at night to avoid being abducted from their homes.[12] That was the case in Uganda, where tens of thousands of children living in unprotected Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps walked miles to city centers every night to avoid abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army.[13] One report on the forced recruitment of children in Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and Liberia also notes that some children were forcibly recruited when they went outside to look for food or provide income for their families.[14] Those who were able to avoid this fate were those who could stay at home. Parents in many contexts have also opted to keep their children out of school to prevent the risk of recruitment.[15] Finally, in Somalia, a community leader explained how he and his family purposely avoid areas considered to be dangerous:

> *"We mostly stay at home, especially at night. When we travel, we always go in groups. We avoid areas where al-Shabaab is known to operate, such as the outskirts of the city, and we try to keep a low profile when moving around in public. Unknown qur'anic schools and bus stations are particularly dangerous. Al-Shabaab intelligence may be present in these areas to recruit young people. I avoid these places and encourage my children and younger relatives to do the same."*[16]

These examples illustrate that civilians often avoid places that are perceived to be risky because of previous incidents of (forced) recruitment and/or the known

presence of non-state armed groups. In other words, these examples suggest that situational avoidance is a protective factor for recruitment.

3.2. Defection (risk factor)

The academic literature has long acknowledged that troop shortages, caused by injury and death during battle, are associated with new recruitment.[17] That is because armed groups seek out recruits to replace those they have lost. However, more recently, emerging research suggests that defection (i.e., unauthorized exit) from non-state armed groups can also lead to troop shortfalls and prompt new recruitment. In this scenario, non-state armed groups recruit to replace individuals who run away from the group and either return to civilian life or report to a government program for ex-combatants. Drawing on the Colombian experience, two recent studies show that when national and international stakeholders successfully encouraged defection from Colombian armed groups, an uptick in the recruitment of children followed soon after.[18] In the case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), deserters "were quickly replaced with a new generation of recruits."[19] The academic literature also notes that armed groups may become more efficient at recruiting new members if they have to recruit on a regular basis, including in response to defections.[20]

Related research also finds that splinter factions, created when combatants defect from a core group, are also more likely to engage in child recruitment.[21] That is because, to survive among competing groups, the splinter faction must quickly mobilize troops. Such practices were observed when, following Abdul Qadir Mumin's split from al-Shabaab in 2015, the newly established Islamic State in Somalia conducted recruitment drives targeting children.[22] Other splinter factions have pursued similar strategies, including the Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricains pour la Justice (Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice) in the Central African Republic and the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (following its split from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia). These examples suggest that defection—whether to join a splinter faction, go home, or report to a government program—is a risk factor for recruitment.

3.3. Sensation seeking (risk factor)

> *"Well, a young kid does not think about that [e.g., the risks]. A young kid likes the adrenaline… For some time, I really liked the war. Having a nice gun, shooting… it was very cool."*[23]

Recent research notes that the personality traits of would-be recruits are an important and under-recognized aspect of joining armed groups.[24] One such personality trait is the seeking of "varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks for the sake of such experience."[25] General findings from psychology indicate that this type of sensation-seeking peaks at around 18-years-old and that males are more sensation-seeking than females.[26]

Much anecdotal evidence links high levels of sensation-seeking to participation in both state and non-state armed groups.[27] As an American infantryman in Afghanistan described:

> *"War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them. It's insanely exciting. The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know. Soldiers discuss that fact with each other and eventually with their chaplains and their shrinks and maybe even their spouses, but the public will never hear about it."*[28]

Preliminary results from a survey of Colombian ex-combatants also support the idea that "the proximity of armed groups combined with the generalized boredom of rural life… produced a toxic combination for high sensation seekers."[29] This research notes that sensation seekers are more likely to join armed groups because they are more receptive to other recruitment motivations, including frustration and peer pressure. This effect is also likely exacerbated in contexts without outlets for legal, sensation-seeking behavior. In summary, these examples suggest that sensation seeking is a risk factor for recruitment.

4. Policy Recommendations

When planning and designing efforts to prevent recruitment, national and local practitioners, as well as their United Nations (UN) partners, should:

- **Examine protective factors in addition to risk factors:** With the exception of a few recent reports, the policy literature typically focuses on the risk of recruitment (i.e., push and pull factors).[30] This approach cannot explain why individuals with the same risk profiles sometimes join non-state armed groups and sometimes do not. In addition, because risk-based approaches focus on deficits, such as unemployment and lack of education, they can inadvertently stigmatize individuals, families, and whole communities as "at-risk" or "high-risk."[31] Instead, practitioners should give equal attention to protective factors. Protective factors help identify what already works at the individual, family, and community levels so that these factors can be strengthened as part of recruitment prevention efforts. As outlined above, some of these protective factors have already been identified in the literature. However, others—such as situational avoidance—should be identified through additional research.
- **Consider situational prevention:** As outlined in the previous section, children who leave their homes to look for food or income are often more vulnerable to recruitment than children who stay home. That is similar to the finding in the GBV literature that women and girls who leave IDP camps to collect firewood are more vulnerable to sexual assault. To prevent sexual assault, practitioners have endeavored to find alternative fuel sources.[32] Civilian police and peacekeeping forces have also accompanied women and girls in "firewood patrols."[33] This type of situational prevention, which aims to lower opportunities for GBV while increasing the risks to non-state armed groups, could also be used to prevent recruitment. Currently, however, many prevention efforts focus solely on counter-narratives and job creation, while schools, IDP camps, marketplaces, and other areas perceived to be dangerous by local communities go unprotected.
- **Be aware that promoting defection may prompt new recruitment:** As illustrated in the previous section, armed groups may increase their recruitment efforts due to troop losses, including defections. However, if nationally and internationally supported programs to encourage defection inadvertently prompt additional recruitment, including the forced recruitment of children, these programs should either be reconsidered or

effective prevention plans should be in place. As existing research on this topic focuses exclusively on Colombia, additional research is needed to establish the impact of defection on recruitment in other contexts.

- **Consider other overlooked risk and protective factors:** The discussion in the previous section points to the often-overlooked role of sensation seeking in recruitment. The identification of this risk factor opens up creative avenues for recruitment prevention. For example, when sensation seeking is a risk factor for recruitment, alternative opportunities for non-violent sensation seeking could be provided. Local initiatives focused on "action sports" such as skateboarding, parkour, and free running have taken this approach and are already popular in Afghanistan and Gaza.[34] A broad range of research also illustrates the value of physical play for resilience in contexts of high risk and/or psychological stress.[35] That is not to suggest that parkour alone can prevent recruitment. However, such initiatives could make modest positive contributions as part of broader prevention strategies that seek to mitigate a range of different risk factors and strengthen protective factors. Likewise, practitioners should explore other overlooked risk and protective factors and the opportunities they open up for prevention rather than rely solely on commonly assumed drivers such as poverty, unemployment, and ideological indoctrination.[36]
- **Incorporate overlooked factors into national strategies and action plans:** Practitioners should incorporate overlooked risk and protective factors into national strategies and action plans, for example, plans to prevent violent extremism or GBV. That should include explicit attention to the different risk and protective factors for forced recruitment, as these factors are also often overlooked in policy documents focused only on voluntary recruitment. Practitioners should also explore links between recruitment prevention efforts and national strategies for the reintegration of ex-combatants. As many authors note, "it makes no sense to let [recruitment] happen and then provide aid [only] after the damage has occurred."[37] While supporting ex-combatants is crucial, commensurate attention should be given to the prevention of ongoing recruitment, particularly in contexts of ongoing conflict.[38]

Endnotes

[1] Joanne Richards, "Connecting Evidence and Policy for the Prevention of Armed Violence: New Tools for Practitioners and Policymakers," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, November 4, 2024, https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/connecting-evidence-and-policy-for-the-prevention-of-armed-violence-new-tools-for-practitioners-and-policymakers.
[2] Intra-state armed conflict is a contested incompatibility between a state and non-state armed group inside the state's territory that causes at least 25 battle-related deaths per year. See Therese Pettersson, "Armed Conflict Dataset Codebook Version 23.1," *UCDP/PRIO*, 1, https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/replication_data/2023_ucdp-prio-acd-231.pdf.
[3] The term violent extremism is often used interchangeably with terrorism, and there is much debate as to the precise definitions of these terms and the extent to which they are conceptually distinct from other forms of armed conflict. NYU-CIC's project on "Connecting Evidence and Policy for the Prevention of Armed Violence: New Tools for Practitioners and Policymakers" does not attempt to define these terms and instead keeps note of the various definitions used in different academic and policy documents.
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[9] Alexandra H Blackwell et al., "Drivers of 'voluntary' Recruitment and Challenges for Families with Adolescents Engaged with Armed Groups: Qualitative Insights from Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo," *PLOS Global Public Health* 3, no. 5 (2023): e0001265–e0001265, https://journals.plos.org/globalpublichealth/article?id=10.1371/journal.pgph.0001265m; Larissa Daria Meier, "Understanding Non-Participation in Armed Groups during the Sri Lankan Civil War," *Social Problems* (2023), https://academic.oup.com/socpro/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/socpro/spad058/7468195; Mercy Corps, "'Motivations and Empty Promises' Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth," April 2016, https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/boko-haram-nigerian; Lösel, King, Bender, and Jugl, "Protective Factors Against Extremism and Violent Radicalization," Marsden and Lee, "Protective Factors for Violent Extremism and Terrorism."
[10] The literature highlights that low sensation seekers may be more prone to flight than high sensation seekers, and that individuals who perceive a direct threat to themselves, rather than an existential threat to their group, may also be more likely to choose flight rather than fight. See for example, Anastasia Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War," *The American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (2016): 411–427, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000277.
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[20] Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (Taylor and Francis, 2016), 6.
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