



# Challenging Authority: A Case Study of Ideologically-Motivated Assaults on Police Officers in Australia

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## Abstract

There has been a concerning rise in ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers, particularly by individuals challenging the legitimacy of legal authority. Understanding the psychological mechanisms underpinning assaults is crucial for officer safety and effective law enforcement strategies. This study explores ideologically-motivated assaults on Australian police through the lens of moral disengagement theory. By examining three specific cases of ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers using court findings and coroners reports, we analyse how offenders justify their actions and the role of ideology in shaping violent encounters. Content analysis revealed that offenders employed all four mechanisms of moral disengagement: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, dehumanisation, and minimisation of consequences. These mechanisms allowed offenders to rationalise, minimise, and justify their violent actions against officers. The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the psychological processes underlying ideologically-motivated violence against police, offering directions for future research and practical interventions.

**Keywords:** Ideology; motivation; assaults; sovereign citizens; police; law enforcement.

## Introduction

Several countries including Australia have recently experienced a rise in ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers, particularly by individuals and groups challenging the legitimacy of legal authority (Hobbs et al., 2024; Parkin et al., 2021). This phenomenon presents a significant threat to police officers, public safety, and the rule of law (Hobbs et al., 2024). The increasing prominence of movements such as sovereign citizens has led to confrontations that are not merely acts of lawbreaking but are deeply rooted in offenders' belief systems, which often frame police as illegitimate and corrupt (Hobbs et al., 2024; Parkin et al., 2021). Understanding the psychological underpinnings of these assaults is crucial for improving officer safety, predicting potentially violent encounters, and developing policing strategies that can prevent escalation. Moreover, by studying the motivations behind these attacks, police agencies can develop more effective ways to engage with ideologically-motivated individuals, potentially fostering safer interactions between the public and police.

## Ideological Motivations for Violence

Ideological motivations can range from political and religious to anti-government sentiments. Ideologically-motivated assaults on police often stem from deeply entrenched beliefs that police are representatives of an oppressive or illegitimate system and often hold an opposition to legal authority (Sarteschi, 2021). United States (US) researchers, Freilich and colleagues (2014, p. 380), assert that extreme far-right individuals are often characterised by strong nationalism, opposition to globalisation, distrust



of federal authority, and a staunch defence of individual freedoms, particularly the right to bear arms and avoid taxes. They tend to believe in conspiracy theories that warn of imminent dangers to national sovereignty or personal liberties, with a conviction that their personal or national way of life is under threat (Freilich et al., 2014, p. 380). While this is a very US-centric definition, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) defines ideologically-fuelled violence more broadly as the use and support of violence in response to social or political grievances (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation [ASIO], 2021). The Australian Government further identifies that ideological motivations for violence are often triggered by political, religious, and cultural beliefs (Living Safe Together, 2024).

One prominent manifestation of ideologically-motivated violence is the sovereign citizen movement, which exemplifies the ideological rejection of legal authority described above. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2010) describes sovereign citizens as anti-government extremists who assert that, despite living within the country, they are independent from the authority and laws of the US (Sarteschi, 2021). While the movement has its roots in the US, it has gained traction in Australia (Gillespie, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2024; Tlozek, 2021). Sovereign citizen ideology is often linked to libertarian principles, particularly in its emphasis on personal sovereignty, distrust of state intervention, and the rejection of centralised government control (Hobbs et al., 2024). However, while libertarianism broadly advocates for minimal government interference in personal and economic affairs, sovereign citizens take this further by actively refusing to recognise government legitimacy, often leading to direct confrontations with law enforcement. This extreme anti-government stance is a key factor in their involvement in ideologically-motivated violence, including assaults on police officers.

A central concept in understanding ideologically-motivated assaults on police is police legitimacy—the degree to which the public perceives law enforcement as having the right to exercise authority and expects compliance with legal directives (Jackson et al., 2012). Legitimacy is not simply about recognising police power; it is fundamentally about the justification of that power and the extent to which it is accepted by the public. Jackson et al. (2012, p. 1051) define police legitimacy as “the right to rule and the recognition by the ruled of that right.” Thus, citizens comply with police directives not only because of coercion or deterrence but because they believe the institution operates within a morally justified framework. However, for individuals and groups who reject the legitimacy of police—such as sovereign citizens and other ideologically-motivated offenders—policing is perceived as an overreach of government control, rather than a necessary function of social order. This rejection of police legitimacy fuels opposition to law enforcement and, in extreme cases, leads to violent confrontations.

In addition, many ideologically-motivated offenders act on personal grievances that they frame in political or ideological terms (Williamson et al., 2020). For example, individuals who have experienced unemployment, economic hardship, or perceived government overreach may develop deep-seated resentment towards the government and police (Baker, 2019; Capelos et al., 2022; Charkawi et al., 2020). These grievances can become extreme when individuals see themselves as victims of systemic injustices, leading them to target the most visible representatives of state power—police officers.

Overall, these different ideological motivations—whether political, religious, or social—share a common theme: a rejection of the legitimacy of the state and its law enforcement representatives. Ideologically-driven offenders often view themselves as engaged in a moral struggle, where violent resistance to police is framed as part of a larger battle against tyranny or oppression (Sarteschi, 2021). In this context, offenders believe their actions are aligned with a higher cause, which allows them to disconnect from the harm inflicted on police officers.

Parkin et al. (2021) identify several factors contributing to the more recent sharp rise in far-right extremism in the US. First, the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of public health measures, such as mask mandates, restrictions on gatherings, and travel bans, sparked widespread public displeasure (Parkin et al., 2021). Protesters expressed their anger and anti-government sentiments, which were further fuelled by online conspiracy theories (Parkin et al., 2021). Some were armed and associated with far-right extremist ideologies, with several assaults resulting in the deaths of police officers (Parkin et al., 2021). The effects of the pandemic were not isolated to the US but also reflected around the world. For example, Australia had one of the most aggressive zero-COVID suppression strategies, leading to large-scale protests and violence towards police (Rogers et al., 2024).

Second, protests against police use of deadly force, particularly following the murder of George Floyd, served as a catalyst for anti-police violence by some sectors of society (Parkin et al., 2021). While most citizens engaged in peaceful protests to hold police accountable during the “Black Lives Matter” and “Defund the Police” movements, violent clashes between far-left extremists and far-right militia groups further escalated violence (Parkin et al., 2021). These movements and calls for accountability extended beyond the US, resonating in countries like Australia (Rogers et al., 2024). In Australia, concerns about police accountability mirrored those seen in the US, particularly in relation to Indigenous deaths in custody, fuelling protests and demonstrations nationwide (Rogers et al., 2024).

Lastly, Parkin et al. (2021) propose that in the US, the delay in President Trump's acknowledgment of defeat in the 2020 election and his reluctance to facilitate the peaceful transfer of power culminated in the January 6, 2021 Capitol attack. This event resulted in multiple deaths, including that of a police officer, and saw the participation of far-right extremists. Ultimately, Parkin et al. (2021) propose that these three extraordinary events significantly contributed to the rise of far-right extremism while also eroding public trust in policing institutions.

### **The Australian Context**

Australia, like many other democracies, has seen a rising level of public distrust in government and police institutions (Rogers et al., 2024). This distrust is fuelled by high-profile cases of police misconduct, controversial government policies, and broader global trends of scepticism toward authority figures (Hobbs et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2024). The demographics and social climate of Australia create a unique and emergent risk, which is aggravated by personal grievances, the use of social media, and a growing distrust in government and authority (Australian National Security, 2024). Australia's diverse population includes a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, some of which have different relationships with government and police. The social climate in Australia has been marked by increasing polarisation, particularly on issues such as public health (e.g., COVID-19 mandates), immigration, and economic inequality (Campion et al., 2023; Dowling & Legrand, 2023; Hobbs et al., 2024; Khalil & Roose, 2023; Peucker & Smith, 2019). This polarisation is fuelling grievances against the state with certain segments of the population viewing the government and its institutions as overreaching or corrupt. The rise of populist and anti-establishment sentiment has further deepened distrust in police and authorities (National Intelligence Community, 2024). These demographic factors and the prevailing social climate create fertile ground for ideologically-motivated individuals who see violence as a legitimate means of challenging or resisting the state.

The Australian Government has identified the presence of several ideological groups or identities within Australia. These include right-wing or nationalist extremist groups, whose goals usually involve preserving the perceived majority culture (usually white/Anglo-Saxon); religious extremists, who are motivated by interpretations of religious texts; issue-based violent extremists, who are dedicated to a specific issue such as anti-capitalism; and ethno-nationalist groups or separatist violence groups, who are involved in violent struggles for independence or ethnic-based conflicts both domestically and internationally (Australian Federal Police, 2024; Living Safe Together, 2024). These groups are in all Australian states and territories and are widespread, reaching both regional and rural communities (ASIO, 2021).

The growing presence of ideologically-motivated violence in Australia has become a significant concern, with police increasingly targeted by individuals who reject government authority. A high-profile example recently unfolded in Wieambilla. In 2022, two Queensland police officers were killed by religiously-motivated domestic terrorists (Messenger, 2024a), who viewed police as "devils and demons" representing the state, with whom they were at war (Messenger, 2024b). Reflecting this heightened threat, Australian National Security increased the terrorism threat in 2024 from "possible" to "probable," noting a substantial increase in ideological extremism, much of it rooted in anti-authority sentiments (Australian National Security, 2024). Several conditions have contributed to this rise in extremism, particularly the use of social media, a lack of social cohesion, and a growing distrust in government agencies.

### **Ideological Motivations Behind Assaults on Police**

Police officers, as enforcers of the law, are often viewed as symbolic representations of the state's authority (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2021; Gruenewald et al., 2016). This symbolic role makes them primary targets for individuals and groups driven by ideological motivations, particularly those who reject or resist government power (Wall & McClanahan, 2025). The targeting of police is not merely about individual officers but rather what they represent—state control, law enforcement, and the perceived imposition of rules on personal freedom (Gruenewald et al., 2016). However, the topic of ideologically-fuelled assaults on police is not widely researched, especially outside the US. As such, the body of knowledge is limited, with most of the existing literature only examining the circumstances of assaults, such as the characteristics of offenders and the events themselves (Hine & Davenport-Klunder, 2025). Some emerging literature has examined the threat that particular ideologies pose to police officers in the line of duty.

Norris (2024) examined all civilian-on-police homicides in the US between 2008 and 2021 to identify instances with ideological motivations to assess prevalence. The findings revealed that right-wing extremists were responsible for more civilian-on-police homicides (6%) compared to those motivated by left-wing concerns, such as reactions to police racism (3%). Suttmoeller and colleagues (2013) conducted a comparative analysis of homicides committed by far-right extremists with all police homicides in the US between 1991 and 2009. Their findings revealed that far-right offenders typically operated as lone wolves or in small groups affiliated with formal extremist organisations, but, notably, they were not acting on behalf of these organisations during

the attacks. Most of these offenders were driven primarily by white supremacist ideologies, highlighting the individualistic and ideologically-motivated nature of their actions, rather than direct organisational coordination.

Parkin et al. (2021) examined the dual threat that far-right extremism poses to police in the US, identifying both external and internal risks. Externally, far-right extremists were found to pose a threat to police, with officers becoming victims of violence. An internal threat was also identified, concerning the involvement or complacency of some officers within policing, who may signal support for far-right extremist ideologies. This internal risk undermines public trust and threatens the legitimacy of policing agencies, exacerbating tensions between police and the public (Parkin et al., 2021).

Gruenewald et al. (2016) analysed the situational factors contributing to fatal attacks on police officers by far-right extremists in the US and identified four main drivers behind these attacks. The first key driver was to avoid arrest where offenders believed violence was necessary to escape apprehension. Other attacks were characterised as mission offenses, which were typically carried out by lone actors intending to make ideological statements through violence, consistent with Suttmoeller et al.'s (2013) findings. In some cases, extremists perceived police presence as a direct threat to their civil liberties or way of life, prompting them to defend their property through violence. Lastly, there were instances where offenders, believing their families were in danger, attacked police to protect their loved ones. These findings illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of fatal attacks on police by extremists.

Another study from the US focused specifically on sovereign citizens and their attacks on police, as opposed to far-right extremists more broadly. The study found that many of these violent encounters began with routine traffic stops (Sarteschi, 2021). Echoing findings by Gruenewald et al. (2016), they found that sovereign citizens often escalated the situation by fleeing (Sarteschi, 2021). Additionally, Sarteschi (2021) discovered that deadly violence also frequently occurred during ambushes where sovereign citizens deliberately targeted police, demonstrating the premeditated nature of some of these fatal encounters. Indeed, this is a common pattern amongst the body of research, with similar findings from Freilich and Chermak (2009) who examined two far-right extremists attacks on US police officers by using a script analysis. The two cases involved an unplanned traffic stop and a premeditated planned attack.

While this body of literature provides valuable insights, it is largely focused on the US context, with limited exploration of similar threats in other regions, such as Australia. Given the rising concerns around far-right extremism globally, there is a critical gap in understanding how these ideologies manifest in the Australian context. Examining the motivations behind ideologically-fuelled assaults on police in Australia is therefore essential to developing more effective policing strategies and addressing the unique challenges posed by these extremist groups.

### **Moral Disengagement Theory**

Bandura's moral disengagement theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms that allow individuals to engage in harmful behaviours without experiencing self-condemnation. This theory posits that people can selectively activate or disengage their moral standards through various cognitive mechanisms, thereby justifying actions that would otherwise be considered morally reprehensible (Bandura, 2016). In the context of ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers, this theoretical approach may offer insights into how offenders mentally reframe their violent actions as justifiable or even necessary.

The theory comprises a series of stages that are used by offenders to justify engaging in certain acts (Bandura, 2016). The four core stages of the moral disengagement process are moral justification, euphemistic labelling, minimisation of consequences, and dehumanisation. The first stage, moral justification, is a cognitive reconstruction, involving the reframing of unethical behaviours to appear socially and morally acceptable (Hsu & Pan, 2018). The second stage is euphemistic labelling, which involves a process of depersonalisation to dissolve feelings of guilt and blame (Bandura, 2016). This is characterised by the offender employing neutral or more positive phrases when considering the consequences of their conduct (Bandura, 2016). The third stage of the process involves the minimisation of consequences, whereby individuals deny the harmful effects of their actions or attempt to rationalise them by comparing their actions with more harmful conduct (Bandura, 2016). Tillman and colleagues (2018) state that, during this stage of the process, individuals misrepresent or ignore the negative consequences resulting from their conduct. The final stage of dehumanisation allows the individual to deprive the victim of human characteristics to repress feelings of guilt or blame (Bandura et al., 1996). During this final stage, individuals excuse and validate their actions by placing blame on the victim of the conduct, which often results in the offender experiencing feelings of self-righteousness (Tillman et al., 2018).

Tillman et al. (2018) suggest that the moral disengagement process is often used by offenders as a coping mechanism to reduce emotions and feelings of blame or regret upon observing the consequences of their decisions. Perceived police illegitimacy is a significant factor in the moral disengagement process, which is particularly relevant to those with ideological beliefs that actively oppose the state (Soares, Barbosa, Matos, & Mendes, 2018). Offenders with particular ideological beliefs, such as sovereign citizens, often believe that they are standing up to a corrupt group and, as such, assaulting police could be seen as a “worthy cause” (Tillman et al., 2018). Through the four major stages of the moral disengagement process, offenders can validate and rationalise their behaviour, even when the conduct results in significant injury or even the death of a police officer.

Moral disengagement theory has been applied to various aspects of policing, including its influence on police officers themselves, such as their involvement in state-sanctioned violence (Soares, Barbosa, & Matos, 2018) and moral disengagement during public protests and violent confrontations (Soares, Barbosa, Matos, & Mendes, 2018). The theory has also been explored in the context of juvenile offenders who, due to perceived injustices by police, disengage morally when engaging in criminal behaviour (Zapolski et al., 2018). Additionally, moral disengagement has been used to examine terrorism, with Bandura (2016) highlighting how terrorists rationalise their violent actions as a means of achieving social change. McAlister (2001) further notes that the primary application of moral disengagement theory has been in the areas of war and terrorism. The theory's association with unethical and harmful behaviour (Detert et al., 2008) makes it highly relevant for understanding the motivations of individuals who assault police officers, providing a framework for analysing how offenders justify their actions. Indeed, Mulholland et al. (2023) recognised the importance of moral disengagement, adapting van den Bos's (2018) growing radicalisation model to include it to gain a better understanding of right-wing extremism in Australia. While their study did not focus on assaults on police, they found compelling evidence of moral disengagement within Australian right-wing extremist groups, where it was actively used to incite violent acts.

In the context of ideologically-motivated assaults on police, this theory is particularly useful for examining how offenders rationalise their violence. Political, religious, social, and other ideologically-driven groups often perceive themselves as morally justified in their opposition to the police, viewing their actions as part of a broader struggle against illegitimate authority (Sarteschi, 2021). The theory of moral disengagement therefore provides a valuable lens through which to analyse how these individuals disconnect from their moral standards and justify their harmful behaviour.

## **The Current Study**

This study aims to explore ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers in Australia through the lens of moral disengagement theory. By examining specific cases involving opposition to the legitimacy of legal authority, this research seeks to understand how offenders justify their actions and the role that ideology plays in shaping these violent encounters. The findings from this study will help to develop targeted intervention strategies and training programs for police, ultimately enhancing public safety and preserving the integrity of legal institutions in Australia.

## **Methods**

This study examined three specific cases of ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers in Australia, using court findings as the primary source of information. Specifically, we asked how might moral disengagement theory explain the way offenders rationalise, minimise, or justify their violent actions against police in the context of ideologically-driven motivations?

### ***Data Source***

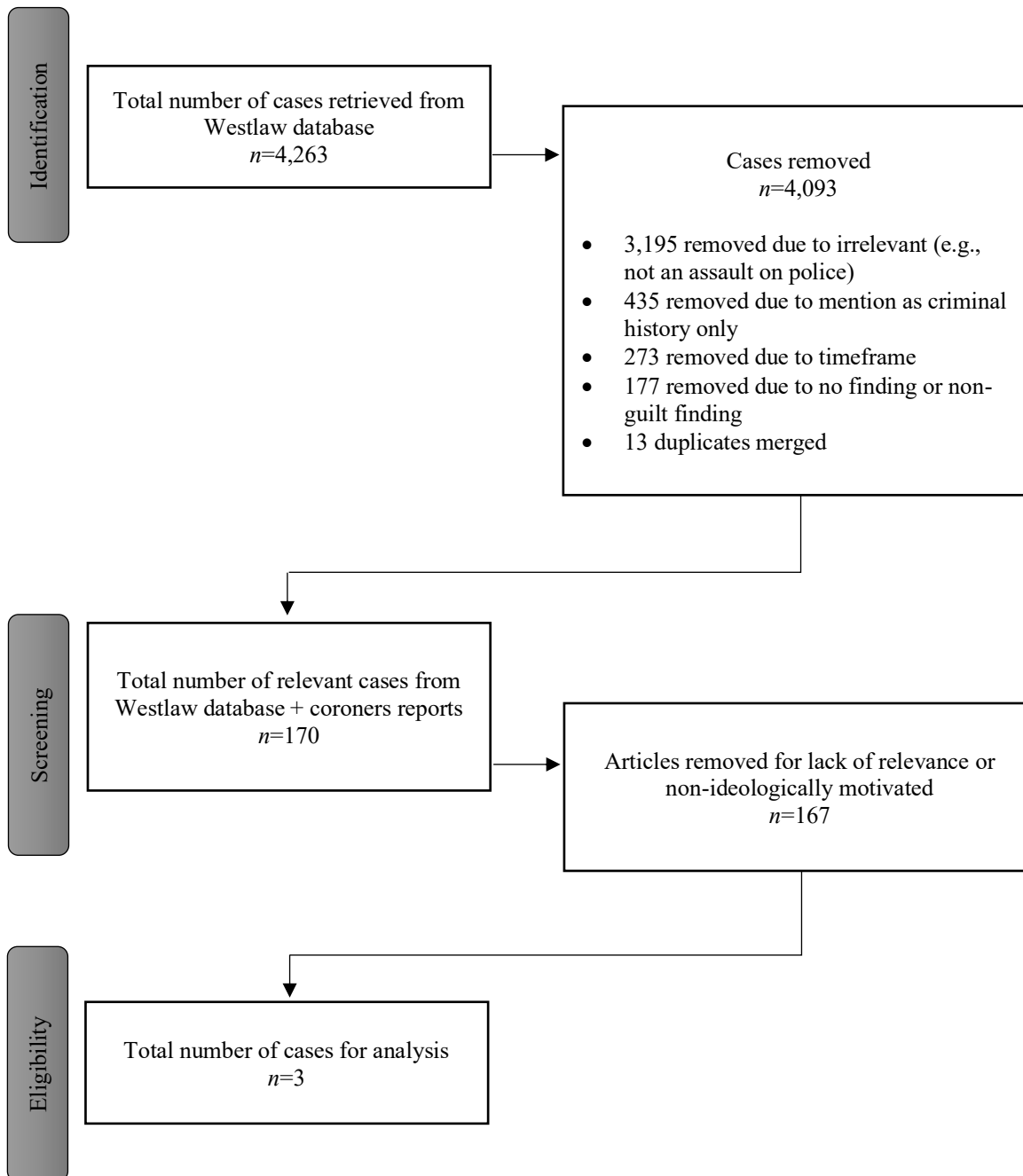
Publicly available court findings and coroners reports for all Australian states/territories were used to identify relevant cases of ideologically-motivated assaults on police in Australia. Court transcripts and coroners reports provide an official and detailed account of events with a rigorous reporting process. The study period was restricted to reports where the assault itself had taken place between January 2010 and December 2023. This period was selected as it promotes a more contemporary understanding of ideologically-motivated assaults on police and acknowledges the rapid advancements in police policy, procedure, and technology which have occurred post-2010 (Hine & Davenport-Klunder, 2025).

To identify relevant court findings, the Westlaw database was searched for cases where the terms “assault” and “police” both occurred in the same sentence. The initial Westlaw database search returned 4,263 cases. Each of these cases were screened for relevance. Cases were excluded if the assault was not on a police officer and only cases where the suspect was found guilty of assaulting a police officer in the execution of their duty were included. Finally, cases were screened for ideological motivations. These were cases where a perceived injustice was the catalyst for the assault and the offender was challenging the legitimacy

of government and police authority. To identify relevant coroners reports, all publicly available reports from each state/territory within the timeframe were scanned for relevance<sup>1</sup>. This resulted in a combined total of three cases (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Inclusion/Exclusion Process*



**Data Coding and Analysis**

A content analysis was conducted of the three cases according to the four main concepts of Bandura's moral disengagement theory: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, dehumanisation, and minimisation of consequences. Qualitative content analyses are a widely used analytical tool for the interpretation of written texts (Selvi, 2019), providing a systematic and

thorough approach which seeks to identify meaning and patterns within and between artefacts (Hall & Wright, 2008). This lends itself effectively to the analysis of court and legal documents, where offenders often justify their actions through language and belief systems. Content analysis allowed for the systematic examination of content related to the key elements of moral disengagement theory. By coding for these mechanisms within the textual data, this method facilitated the identification of patterns in how offenders rationalised, downplayed, or justified their violent actions against police officers. This approach ensured a rigorous and replicable framework for analysing qualitative data while allowing for deeper insight into offender justifications and the ideological underpinnings of their actions (Hall & Wright, 2008; Selvi, 2019). To ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process, an inter-rater reliability check was performed. Two independent coders reviewed all cases to verify the consistency of the coding framework and ensure that the codes were applied accurately. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

## Results

### *R v Barbieri/Barbieri v The Queen*

The Barbieri case is a clear and extreme example of sovereign citizen ideology and strong opposition to police authority (*R v Barbieri*, 2014; *Barbieri v The Queen*, 2016). This case involved the intentional fatal stabbing of a police officer at the offenders' property in 2012. Police were initially called to a neighbour's house in Oakville, New South Wales because the offenders, Mitchell Barbieri and his mother Fiona Barbieri, were using a bow and arrow to shoot at them. The Barbieris had an ongoing hostile relationship with their neighbours, resulting in the neighbours engaging an electrician to install lighting on their property for security. The presence of the electrician had angered Mrs Barbieri, and she had asked him to leave whilst holding a baseball bat. The male offender, Mr Barbieri, then shot arrows at the neighbouring property, which resulted in police attending the Barbieris' property. The offenders were already well known to police due to prior incidents and their adherence to sovereign citizen beliefs. The offenders refused to speak with police or exit the dwelling when police arrived and began filming the police from inside the house. This non-compliance resulted in a siege situation, whereby police officers surrounded the property to gain access. The conflict escalated when police entered the offenders' home leading to Mitchell Barbieri's fatal stabbing of the officer.

#### *Moral Justification*

In this case, evidence of moral justification is strongly present. Throughout the incident, the offenders rationalised their actions as a form of self-defence against what they perceived as unlawful police intrusion. For example, the offenders sent multiple emails to various state and federal ministers when police arrived at the property, asserting their right to protect their property and family. One email read, "Let me remind you, we have every right to defend ourselves, our family and our property" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 28), reflecting their belief that their actions were morally justified.

The offenders accused the police of corruption, stating, "How dare our politicians and police continue to support murderers over the innocent" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 28). By framing themselves as the "innocent" party and labelling the police as "murderers," they created a narrative that cast their actions as a justified resistance against an illegitimate authority. The offenders viewed their conduct not as an attack but as a necessary defence, thus minimising any internal moral conflict about their violent actions. A follow-up email was then sent reading, "Corrupt police attempting to break into our property" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 32). Again, this depicts the process of the offenders rationalising their conduct as warranted by framing the police force as the enemy. The offender using the terms "murderers" and "corrupt" to describe the police officers, whilst stating that they were "innocent," indicates a process of moral justification that occurred prior to the assault on the police officer. The offenders believed that defending their property and family from perceived threats was morally justified. Their resistance was rooted in the belief that the police had no legitimate authority over them, as evidenced by the sign on the offenders' gate stating, "Autarchy in place on these premises" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 29). Finally, after being cautioned and asked why he stabbed the officer, the offender replied, "that will happen when guys do home invasions" (*R v Barbieri*, 2014, para. 43), reflecting his belief that his actions were justified as defence against perceived unlawful intrusion.

#### *Euphemistic Labelling*

Evidence of euphemistic labelling is also present in this case. The offenders used language to downplay and rationalise their defiance of police officers. One such example was the offender sending a text message to his father stating: "the police are at the front gate, for standing up for our rights" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 35). By framing their defiance as merely "standing up for our rights," the offenders minimised the severity and confrontational nature of their actions, masking their violent resistance under the guise of a justified defence. This statement reframes their aggressive behaviour as a defensive stand, rather than an attack, aligning with euphemistic labelling. The offenders referred to the police presence as an attempt to "break into our property" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 32). This terminology further reflects euphemistic labelling, as it portrays the police operation

not as a lawful response to a threat but rather as an unlawful intrusion. This language serves to obscure the reality of their violent confrontation, casting the police as the aggressors and themselves as victims. The offenders' conduct can also be linked to advantageous comparison, whereby the offender compares their behaviour with other behaviour that is contrastingly worse to validate their immoral conduct. By referring to police and politicians as "corrupt murderers," the offender was attempting to infer that their conduct was much less harmful in comparison.

### *Dehumanisation*

This case also exhibits clear evidence of dehumanisation by stripping the victim of human qualities to justify harmful actions and reduce any feelings of guilt. In this case, the offenders repeatedly dehumanised the police, portraying them not as individuals but as faceless symbols of an oppressive and illegitimate system. As previously mentioned, throughout the incident, the offenders referred to the police using terms like "corrupt" and "murderers." By assigning these labels, they dehumanised the officers, reducing them to mere representations of a perceived hostile force, rather than acknowledging them as people. A particularly prominent instance of dehumanisation is noted when the offender stated, "look at him, stars and stripes" (O'Sullivan, 2018, para. 77), in reference to the police officer's higher ranking, acknowledging the victim's higher policing rank as Detective Inspector. This statement acknowledged the officer's rank while deliberately ignoring his personal identity. After stabbing the officer, Mitchell was reported to have said, "let the copper cunt die, fuck him" (*Barbieri v The Queen*, 2016, para. 14), while Fiona said, "Let the dog cunt die, he deserves to fucking die" (*R v Barbieri*, 2014, para. 40). The term "dog" further deprives the officer of human characteristics, reducing him to an animalistic label that strips him of individuality and moral worth. These statements reveal their perception of the police officers not as people but as symbols of an oppressive system or an abstract enemy.

### *Minimisation of Consequences*

Some of these previous examples also illustrate the offenders' use of minimisation of consequences to justify their violent actions. One prominent example is the offenders' framing of their violent resistance as a mere defence of their rights. By declaring that they were simply "standing up for their rights" and describing the police as "corrupt" intruders, they obscured the reality of the threat they posed to police officers. Moreover, by asserting that they were "defending" their property against "murderers," the offenders further trivialised the potential repercussions of their assault. This attitude indicates that they viewed the outcome, including the fatal stabbing of a police officer, as a necessary consequence in their fight against an illegitimate authority. Continued yelling and cursing at the officers after the stabbing, without regard for the harm caused, shows a dismissal of the severity of their actions and a minimisation of the consequences of their violence. This included Fiona reacting with, "it's his own fucking fault, he fucking deserved it" (*R v Barbieri*, 2014, para. 40).

### *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)*

Like the first case, *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)* (2021) also involved a sovereign citizen, but the nature of the assault was less extreme. The offender similarly did not recognise police authority and claimed that laws were divinely ordained, reflecting typical sovereign citizen beliefs. This case involved a woman displaying a high level of hostility and defiance towards police during a traffic stop. The offender was stopped by police for driving without a license, insurance, or registration but refused to move her vehicle off the roadway. Following this, additional police officers arrived and an argument ensued as the offender did not believe she was subject to state traffic laws. The offender refused to follow the police direction regarding removing the cigarette from her mouth. The assault on police involved the offender pouring a drink over one officer and throwing a bottle of iced coffee at another officer, which she believed to be an act of "self-defence."

### *Moral Justification*

In this case, the offender displayed clear evidence of moral justification by asserting her actions were a defence of her rights. Throughout her interaction with the police, she expressed that she was not subject to the statutory laws, claiming, "I am a living woman ... not a Legal Fiction Person" (*Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)*, 2021, para. 17). The offender contended that her actions, including driving without a license and assaulting police officers, were justified because she believed the laws did not apply to her and that she was defending her "unalienable/inalienable indefeasible rights to life, liberty, freedom and property" (*Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)*, 2021, para. 17). She believed she was "travelling on the road" under her "inalienable right" citing the Magna Carta and the Commonwealth Constitution, therefore she did not commit any crimes. The offender's belief that the police had no lawful authority over her led her to frame her actions as rightful resistance against an illegitimate system. This perceived police illegitimacy is analogous to the first case, which also depicted attitudes of self-sovereignty and anti-police sentiment.

### *Euphemistic Labelling*

Euphemistic labelling is evident in how the offender described her confrontations with the police. For instance, she referred to her refusal to comply with police directions as "standing under the jurisdiction of my flag" and described police actions as "war crimes" (*Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)*, 2021, para. 19). This language serves to downplay the severity of her conduct by framing her resistance as a sovereign right, rather than criminal behaviour. Furthermore, the offender argued in court that she was "provoked" by police officers and that she was acting in "self-defence." The assault of pouring the drink over the officer was in response to one of the police officers removing a cigarette from her mouth. It was likely seen by the offender as a harmless expression of her frustration and defiance, rather than an assault with serious implications.

### *Dehumanisation*

Dehumanisation is particularly evident in the offender's characterisation of the police officers. She repeatedly asserted that police officers were committing "war crimes" and framed them as part of an oppressive regime, rather than recognising them as individuals performing their duties. By dehumanising the officers, the offender could view them not as people deserving of respect and lawful interaction but as symbols of an unjust system that needed to be challenged.

### *Minimisation of Consequences*

The offender's actions also reflected a minimisation of the consequences. She dismissed the severity of driving an unregistered vehicle, assaulting police officers, and obstructing police. By asserting that the police had "no lawful authority" and that her rights were above statutory laws, the offender trivialised the impact of her behaviour on public safety and law enforcement. Her argument that the police had no jurisdiction over her allowed her to minimise the legal and social consequences of her actions, as she viewed them as justified efforts to uphold her self-proclaimed rights, rather than offenses.

### ***R v EQ***

This third case involved a different form of ideological motivation, centred on protesting Australian family law, rather than sovereign citizen beliefs. The *R v EQ* (2021) case shifts from the theme of sovereign citizenship to a broader look at other ideologies that challenge legal authority. This case involved an offender committing a large-scale bomb hoax within the Brisbane International Airport, threatening police officers with detonation of the bomb (*R v EQ*, 2021). The offender's actions were driven by a belief that the legal system had wronged him, particularly in relation to his family situation. Reports submitted by the offender's psychiatrist infer that the bomb hoax was a general protest against the current family law frameworks in Australia, asserting that he felt the existing laws were biased and prejudicial towards men (*R v EQ*, 2021, para. 59). Such attitudes can be linked to a rise in the "male victimhood ideology," which argues that men are the true victims of gender-based discrimination and is often linked to extremist values (Anduiza & Rico, 2022). Hence, while the offender's grievances were personal in nature, they were framed within a broader ideological narrative of systemic injustice, aligning with patterns observed in ideologically-motivated offenders (Williamson et al., 2020). His belief that the legal system was fundamentally biased against men reflects the "male victimhood ideology," which has been linked to extremist values and broader anti-government sentiment (Anduiza & Rico, 2022). As seen in other cases of ideologically-motivated violence, personal hardship and resentment towards institutions can escalate when individuals perceive themselves as victims of systemic discrimination, reinforcing their opposition to state authority (Baker, 2019; Capelos et al., 2022; Charkawi et al., 2020).

### *Moral Justification*

In this case, moral justification is evident in the offender's perception of his actions as a necessary response to an unfair legal system. The offender perceived unfairness towards men in the family law system in Australia and believed that the system had failed him by allowing his wife and children to leave the country. By committing a bomb hoax and threatening police officers, he viewed his conduct as a stand against an unjust legal decision, intending to draw attention to his personal grievances. The offender's belief that he was advocating for justice and change allowed him to rationalise his violent actions, perceiving them as necessary to make a public statement.

### *Euphemistic Labelling*

The euphemistic labelling stage was likely a primarily internal process in this case. During the confrontation at the airport, his threat of a bomb was likely framed in his mind as a desperate cry for justice, rather than a criminal act. Although no direct quotes from the offender are provided in the judgment, the context suggests that he likely viewed his threats and aggressive behaviour not as an attack but as an attempt to force authorities to reconsider what he perceived as an unjust situation (*R v EQ*, 2021). This reframing of his actions allowed him to minimise their severity and present them as an expression of his grievances, rather than a violent threat.

### *Dehumanisation*

Dehumanisation is also present in this case, particularly in the offender's interactions with the police officers at the scene. By framing the officers as mere enforcers of an unjust system, he stripped them of their individuality and humanity. Although the judgment does not detail specific language used by the offender, his behaviour, such as threatening to "lash out" at officers with needles coated in snake venom, indicates a lack of regard for the officers' well-being. By viewing them as obstacles to his goal rather than as individuals, the offender was able to justify his aggressive actions without moral conflict.

### *Minimisation of Consequences*

The offender's actions also displayed minimisation of consequences. The significant impact of his actions included the complete evacuation of the international terminal; the cessation of airport operations for several hours; and distress caused to his estranged wife, daughters, and others present. Nonetheless, the offender appeared to view these outcomes as secondary to his broader goal of challenging the family law system. By perceiving his bomb hoax as necessary to bring attention to his grievances, he downplayed the distress and danger his actions caused to the public, police officers, and airport staff.

## **Discussion**

This study explored ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers in Australia through the lens of moral disengagement theory. By analysing three specific cases involving offenders who opposed the legitimacy of legal authority, we sought to understand how these individuals rationalised their violent actions against police officers. The findings reveal that moral disengagement mechanisms were prominently used by the offenders in all cases, providing valuable insights into the psychological processes underpinning ideologically-driven violence against police.

The first two cases demonstrated that sovereign citizen ideology manifests in various forms of resistance, from fatal violence (*R v Barbieri*, 2014) to acts of physical defiance (pouring iced coffee in *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)*, 2021). This diversity in behaviour demonstrates the extent to which these beliefs can motivate different actions while still being underpinned by the same processes of moral disengagement. In contrast, the third case (*R v EQ*, 2021) presented a different ideological motivation, centred on protesting family law. Despite the variation in specific beliefs, the patterns of moral disengagement—moral justification, euphemistic labelling, dehumanisation, and minimisation of consequences—remained remarkably consistent across all cases. This suggests that moral disengagement is a common psychological mechanism in ideologically driven assaults on police, regardless of the particular ideology involved.

These findings align with previous research on moral disengagement and its role in facilitating unethical or harmful behaviour (Bandura, 2016; Detert et al., 2008). The study extended the application of moral disengagement theory to the context of ideologically-motivated assaults on police in Australia, an area that has been underexplored in existing literature predominantly focused on the US (Gruenewald et al., 2016; Sarteschi, 2021; Suttmoeller et al., 2013). Moreover, the study supports Mulholland et al.'s (2023) adaptation of van den Bos's (2018) radicalisation model, which highlights moral disengagement as a critical factor in right-wing extremism in Australia. The offenders' actions demonstrate how moral disengagement mechanisms can be employed to rationalise violence in service of ideological beliefs, emphasising the need to address these cognitive processes in efforts to mitigate such threats.

### ***Moral Justification***

Across all three cases, offenders used moral justification to rationalise their violent actions against police officers. In *R v Barbieri* (2014), the offenders framed their actions as self-defence against "corrupt" and "murderous" police officers invading their property. They believed they were protecting their rights and family from unlawful intrusion. In *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)* (2021), the offender asserted that she was defending her "inalienable rights" and that statutory laws did not apply to her, justifying her assault as a necessary response to illegitimate authority. In *R v EQ* (2021), the offender perceived his bomb hoax and threats as a justified means to challenge perceived injustices within the family law system, seeing his actions as a stand against an unfair legal decision. This finding aligns with prior research that suggests individuals who hold anti-authority beliefs often frame their actions as morally justified, positioning themselves as defenders of rights or justice (Bandura, 2016; Hsu & Pan, 2018). The offenders' use of moral justification mirrors findings from studies on far-right extremism, where individuals perceive violent actions against police as part of a larger moral or ideological struggle (Norris, 2024; Parkin et al., 2021).

### ***Euphemistic Labelling***

Euphemistic labelling emerged as a key strategy that offenders used to downplay the severity of their actions. In *R v Barbieri* (2014), the offenders framed their confrontation with police as "standing up for our rights," rather than an aggressive assault. This language minimised the violence involved, allowing the offenders to perceive their actions as a legitimate defence, rather

than criminal conduct. A similar pattern was seen in *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)* (2021), where the offender described her refusal to comply with police orders as “standing under the jurisdiction of my flag” and labelled police actions as “war crimes.” By employing euphemistic language, offenders masked the reality of their defiance and aggression, reframing their behaviour as an expression of their sovereign rights. Euphemistic labelling reduces personal accountability by obscuring the harmfulness of one's actions through sanitised language (Bandura et al., 1996). Hoffman (2017) observes that extremist groups often use euphemistic terms to legitimise violence, framing aggressive acts as “defensive measures” or “necessary actions” for a greater cause. This aligns with the offenders' behaviour in the present cases, where language was manipulated to rationalise and minimise the perception of wrongdoing.

### ***Dehumanisation***

Dehumanisation was prominently displayed as offenders stripped police officers of their human qualities, facilitating violence without moral restraint. In *R v Barbieri* (2014), the offenders used derogatory terms to reduce the officer to subhuman status. In *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)* (2021), the offender labelled the officers as “war criminals,” casting them as part of a hostile regime. Similarly, in *R v EQ* (2021), the offender's threats and behaviour toward the police indicated a lack of regard for their individual rights and well-being. These findings align with moral disengagement theory, suggesting that by dehumanising their victims, offenders can disengage morally, allowing them to commit acts of violence without feelings of guilt. Dehumanisation allows individuals to disengage from moral self-sanctions by perceiving victims as devoid of human qualities (Bandura et al., 1996). Haslam (2006) notes that dehumanisation is a common precursor to violence as it diminishes empathy and justifies harmful actions. In extremist contexts, offenders often view police as symbols of an oppressive system, rather than as people (Norris, 2024). This detachment facilitates the escalation of violence against police officers.

### ***Minimisation of Consequences***

Offenders minimised the consequences of their actions, reducing feelings of guilt or responsibility. In *R v Barbieri* (2014), the offenders dismissed the severity of fatally stabbing a police officer, expressing that the officer “deserved to die.” In *Reiman v Commissioner of Police (Qld)* (2021), the offender trivialised her assault by framing it as a reaction to provocation, downplaying the impact on the officers involved. In *R v EQ* (2021), the offender overlooked the widespread disruption and potential harm caused by his bomb hoax, focusing solely on his personal grievances. Minimisation of consequences allows individuals to disregard or downplay the harm caused by their actions (Bandura, 2016). This mechanism reduces the emotional impact of wrongdoing, making it easier to engage in harmful behaviour without self-condemnation. McAlister (2001) found that terrorists often minimise the consequences of their actions by focusing on their ideological objectives, rather than the harm inflicted. Zapolski et al. (2018) note that offenders who perceive injustices by police may disregard the impact of their criminal behaviour, justifying it as a necessary response.

### ***Practical Implications***

Understanding how moral disengagement facilitates ideologically-motivated assaults on police officers has important implications for police and public safety. The consistent use of moral disengagement mechanisms by offenders highlights the need for police officers to be trained in recognising and responding to these psychological processes. Understanding how offenders justify their actions through moral disengagement can better equip officers to de-escalate confrontations with ideologically-motivated individuals.

As recognised by ASIO, the rise of ideologically-fuelled extremism presents as a growing risk in both the Australian socio-political landscape and globally (Australian National Security, 2024). This highlights the importance of understanding how extremist ideologies are fostered and maintained to keep officers and citizens safe. Several prevention strategies are suggested in the Australian Government's (2022) counter-terrorism strategy. These include increasing education programs to prevent the radicalisation of young people, the effective rehabilitation of previous extremist offenders, and up-to-date intelligence and law enforcement resources to prevent attacks from occurring.

In light of the current study's findings, training programs should focus on identifying signs of moral justification and euphemistic labelling during interactions. For example, officers should be attentive to language that frames illegal actions as defence of personal rights. Recognising these cues can prompt officers to adjust their communication strategies, aiming to de-escalate tension by addressing the underlying beliefs without escalating the conflict. Specifically, Detert et al. (2008) found that individuals with higher levels of empathy are less likely to engage in moral disengagement. Being acutely aware of the needs and feelings of others can prevent the activation of moral disengagement mechanisms.

Given that offenders may perceive police as symbols of corruption or oppression, officers face heightened risks during interactions with ideologically-motivated individuals. Research on procedural justice and trust suggests that the way police

officers interact with individuals can significantly impact perceptions of legitimacy and willingness to comply (Murphy & Cherney, 2012; Tyler, 2004). Procedurally just policing emphasises that police interactions with citizens, particularly those where criminal justice decisions are made, must meet four essential components. Citizens must be given the opportunity to participate, perceive officers as acting with neutrality, feel respected by officers, and believe that officers are trustworthy (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Murphy, 2011). This is particularly challenging in a landscape where police organisations continue to maintain paramilitary persona and practices (Morgan, 2022), which has historically undermined police legitimacy in Australia (Bull & Stratta, 1995). In this nexus, militarised and armed police likely become increasingly threatening to those with radicalised ideology, increasing the risk of violent attacks on officers and fatal responses for citizens. By applying procedural justice principles, officers may be able to mitigate negative perceptions and build trust, even among those who hold anti-government or anti-police sentiments.

Policing agencies should consider implementing targeted community outreach programs to build trust with groups that may harbour anti-government sentiments. Engaging in open dialogues, educational workshops, and collaborative initiatives can help bridge gaps between police and these communities (Davenport-Klunder et al., 2024). Working with community leaders, including those who may influence individuals susceptible to extremist ideologies, can aid in disseminating messages that counteract moral disengagement mechanisms (Murphy et al., 2017).

### ***Strengths and Limitations***

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size of three cases limits the generalisability of the findings. However, cases of ideologically-motivated assaults on police are a rare occurrence and these cases represent all incidences reported in the Westlaw database over a 13-year period. The reliance on court findings and coroners reports, although providing detailed accounts, may not capture the full extent of the offenders' psychological processes due to the secondary nature of the data. Additionally, the reliance on publicly available data sources may not capture all relevant cases as some are not made publicly accessible. This is mostly for ethical reasons, particularly to protect the privacy and sensitivity of victims, offenders, and their families. Given the exploratory nature of this research, we focused on publicly available reports as they offer a feasible and ethical means of identifying and analysing relevant cases. Future research should expand upon these data sources, such as using the National Coronial Information System (NCIS) to provide a more complete dataset.

Future research should also consider expanding the sample size to include a broader range of cases across different regions and using different data sources. For example, studies involving interviews with offenders, where feasible, could provide deeper insights into their psychological processes and the role of moral disengagement in their actions.

Nonetheless, the findings of this study provide a foundation and open avenues for further research into ideologically-motivated violence. Future studies could explore the prevalence of moral disengagement mechanisms in a broader sample of ideologically-motivated offenders to understand better how these psychological processes operate in various contexts. Additionally, research into the effectiveness of intervention strategies aimed at countering moral disengagement could provide valuable insights for police and policymakers.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of these cases through Bandura's moral disengagement theory reveals how offenders use psychological mechanisms to justify, rationalise, and minimise their violent actions against police officers. The findings indicate that ideologically-motivated beliefs, particularly those opposing the legitimacy of legal authority, are central to this process of moral disengagement. By understanding these dynamics, policing agencies can develop targeted intervention strategies that address the root causes of such violence, ultimately enhancing public safety and preserving the integrity of legal institutions in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> One case included a fatal attack on an officer; thus, a coroner's report and court transcript were available and were combined for analysis.

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