

Uncharted Territory: Towards an Evidence-Based Criminology of Sovereign Citizens Through a Systematic Literature Review

by Verena Fiebig and Daniel Koehler

Abstract

Sovereign citizens are part of an extreme anti-government movement. Since they fundamentally reject the authority of the state, they repeatedly come into conflict with governmental actors. Many publications have examined ideology and strategies of sovereign citizens. However, few studies empirically address their demographics and criminogenic factors. Based on a systematic literature review, we identified only eight empirical studies, which are used as the basis for this article's assessments. The results of the systematic literature review provide information about empirical results on demographics, driving factors of radicalization, mental health issues, behaviors and offences. However, due to the predominantly descriptive analyses and the lack of generalizability, these results can only be considered as preliminary evidence for a criminology of sovereign citizens. Further empirical research is needed to better understand who sovereign citizens are, what their radicalization processes look like, and which factors can predict the use of violence. Only then can effective P/CVE measures be developed and adequately established.

Keywords: Sovereign citizens, anti-government extremists, systematic literature review, U.S., Canada, Germany

Introduction

As early as 2014, U.S. law enforcement personnel ranked the sovereign citizens movement as the nation's top domestic extremist threat.[1] Sovereign citizens, however, are only one type of anti-government extremists in the U.S., which also include groups such as tax protesters and militia supporters, among others. Similar to the U.S., anti-government extremists in Canada are diverse, with Freeman on the Land (FOTL) as the supposedly largest movement.[2] Comparable groups and milieus also exist in other countries—such as Australia, New Zealand, and Germany—where authorities struggle with these extremists, as there is in recent years an increasing number of supporters and a growing endorsement of violent acts among them in the last few years.[3] Determining the number of anti-government extremists or specific subgroups is difficult in the U.S. and Canada due to ideological similarities and the membership overlap between groups, and due to the lack of surveillance and monitoring. Rough estimates for sovereign citizens in the U.S. arrive at about 300,000 members and supporters.[4] In Canada, the anti-authority community is estimated to number between 5,000 and 10,000 individuals.[5] German sovereign citizens—the so-called “Reichsbürger” [citizens of the empire] and “Selbstverwalter” [self administrators]—are monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) as an extremist milieu, currently estimates the membership at 21,000.[6]

Sovereign citizens are responsible for a significant number of nonviolent offenses and violent crimes. For example, in their study of tax-financial crimes in the U.S., Sullivan et al. (2019) show that sovereign citizens are the second largest perpetrator group of financial crimes, such as tax fraud, at 34 percent, next to tax protesters at 38 percent.[7] Violent crimes are primarily directed against law enforcement personnel and other representatives of the state, as their authority is seen as illegitimate and a constraint for personal liberties.[8] In an analysis of 24 violent U.S. sovereign citizen incidents, the Department of Homeland Security found that in 20 out of 24 incidents between 2010 and 2014 the victims were law enforcement officers (LEO).[9] Sarteschi finds that in “75 instances in which sovereign citizens attempted to harm or did harm LEOs, there were 27 LEOs killed by sovereign citizens between 1983 and July 2020.”[10] Multiple studies show that sovereign citizen violence most frequently occurs during “routine law encounters at a suspect's home, during enforcement stops and at government offices.”[11] Police officers and bailiffs are most often the victims of acts of resistance. Public administration and court employees are often targets of coercion and extortion

in response to official documents.[12] In Germany, “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter” are classified as extremist milieus after two violent incidents occurred in 2016, in which two so-called “Selbstverwalter” proclaimed their private property to be a sovereign state and shot at police officers, killing one.[13]

Because the anti-government extremist movement is complex and includes many different groups subsumed under this label, this article focuses on sovereign citizens and comparable groups. A growing body of academic literature focuses on the origin and ideology of sovereign citizens in order to facilitate identification of individuals and groups from this spectrum for example by law enforcement and judicial personnel, as well as to provide recommendations for countermeasures. However, there is a lack of empirical studies that address the characteristics and criminogenic factors of movement adherents.

The overarching goal of this article is to assess and chart the existing empirical basis of knowledge about this largest group of anti-government extremists by applying a systematic literature review on demographics and criminogenic factors of sovereign citizen using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) format.[14] The study is limited to the U.S., Canada, and Germany because, beyond from the identification of sovereign citizens in other countries such as U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, little research has been conducted on individuals and groups in these countries. This article proceeds as follows: after information on the definition and overlaps between sovereign citizens in the U.S., Canada, and Germany, the methodology for the systematic literature review will be introduced and its results are presented. Through the systematic literature review, it was possible to identify in total eight empirical studies on personal characteristics of sovereign citizens, which are reviewed and discussed regarding demographics, driving factors of radicalization, mental health issues, behaviors and offences.

Sovereign Citizens in Different Countries and Their Commonalities

American, Canadian, and German law enforcement agencies and extremism experts define sovereign citizens as individuals and loose networks who hold strong anti-government beliefs that lead to the rejection of local, federal, or state authority and the legal system.[15] Sovereign citizens are classified as a domestic terrorist threat in the U.S.[16] In Germany, the sovereign citizens movement is monitored as an extremist milieu by the BfV.[17] Applying Berger’s definition of extremism, sovereign citizens as extremists share “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group,”[18] which in the present cases targets the allegedly illegitimate state and its representatives.

Given the influences from different anti-government extremist movements and far-right groups, sovereign citizens today are very heterogeneous regarding ideology, narratives, behavior, and visions of the future.[19] Nevertheless, remarkable and significant commonalities between all of these movements are clearly visible, in part because sovereign citizens in Canada and Germany are taking their cues from developments among U.S. sovereign citizens.[20] Based on the belief that the political system, the government, and the laws are illegitimate, sovereign citizens employ specific strategies to challenge the authority of the state. For example, they invoke laws from other historical contexts, such as the “Third Reich” in Germany,[21] or use their own legal interpretations of common law [22] in the US and Canada, to delegitimize currently valid laws. They use fraudulent license plates and identity documents in order to distance themselves from the current system.[23] Furthermore, they use redemption theory in the belief that (unlike their strawman) as an “individual” they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government,[24] and thereby seek to avoid any legal consequences resulting from their illegal behavior. Their worldview is built on conspiracy theories which supposedly prove that the state acts illegally in order to restrict citizens in their innate rights and that the government makes a profit at citizens’ expense.[25] Narratives and conspiracy theories that complement the core assumption vary and are usually specific to the countries’ history, governmental and legal systems. However, the narratives often function and are used in similar ways, namely as underpinnings of the basic assumptions to legitimize the desire to emancipate oneself from a state perceived as arbitrary and to portray their own intimidating and violent behavior as self-defense.[26]

In addition to ideological overlaps, more commonalities among sovereign citizens in the U.S., Canada, and Germany can be identified regarding strategies and behavior. Experts in all aforementioned countries highlight instances of paper terrorism by supporters of this ideology, including the use of pseudo-legal language—for example by declaring sovereignty by filing pseudo-legal documents—and particular spellings of their names, demands that judges or police officers identify themselves, use of false documents to withdraw from government, claims for damages and false liens against state officials, and harassment or intimidation of officials.[27]

Based on such multiple similarities, we consider the various regional sovereign citizen movements to be comparable in order to assess the existing empirical literature for the identification of the current state of knowledge on demographic characteristics and criminogenic factors of followers.

Systematic Literature Review

The increasing number of supporters and violent acts attributed to this extremist spectrum in recent years has led to a growing body of literature about this phenomenon. However, most of that literature focuses on the origin,[28] the ideology,[29] or isolated incidents whereby the latter usually remain anecdotal in nature. There is a lack of empirical research, and so far we have not accumulated much robust knowledge about demographic and biographical characteristics of sovereign citizens as well as the causes and trajectories of their radicalization. As Perry et al. state, “there is still a paucity of scholarship on the motives, nature, and methods of the FOTL [Freemen of the Land] and similar anti-authority movements in Canada that are informed by primary data.”[30]

To answer the guiding research question of this article, we conducted a systematic literature review in May and June 2022 using PRISMA.[31] The PRISMA flowchart is reproduced below in Figure 1. As explained above, this systematic literature review is limited to the U.S., Canada, and Germany, as there has been little research on sovereign citizens in other countries. The data were generated using the search terms (“Sovereign Citizen” | “Sovereign Citizen Movement” | “Freemen-on-the-land” | “Freemen on the land”) AND (extremism | anti-government | moor | militia | posse) and ((“Reichsbürger” | “Selbstverwalter”) AND (Extremismus | BRD | Bundesrepublik Deutschland) in Google Scholar and Scopus with the help of the software Publish or Perish.[32] In addition, the leading academic (i.e., peer-reviewed) journals in the field of terrorism and extremism research [33] were explored using the search terms “Sovereign Citizen”, “Sovereign Citizen Movement”, “Freemen-on-the-Land”, “Freemen on the Land”, as well as “Reichsbürger” and “Selbstverwalter”. The same search terms were used to identify publicly available law enforcement documents and research reports on the home pages of the Department of Homeland Security, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) located in the U.S., the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS) as well as the BfV in Germany. Wherever possible on the listed home pages, the search was restricted to publications, which excluded (for example) glossary contributions. In addition, the references of the studies identified as relevant were searched for other important studies (snowball technique). English and German language literature was included. The main inclusion criteria for our assessment were that (1) the study must be based on systematically collected primary data (e.g., interviews with movement members, participant observation, or press reports) with (2) personal characteristics of sovereign citizens as research interest. Isolated case studies and theses were excluded. This search resulted in a total of 1998 reports screened of which 1631 were excluded based on title and abstract. In the end, only eight studies met the inclusion criteria and were evaluated for this article.

Figure 1: Identification of Studies Included in Literature Review

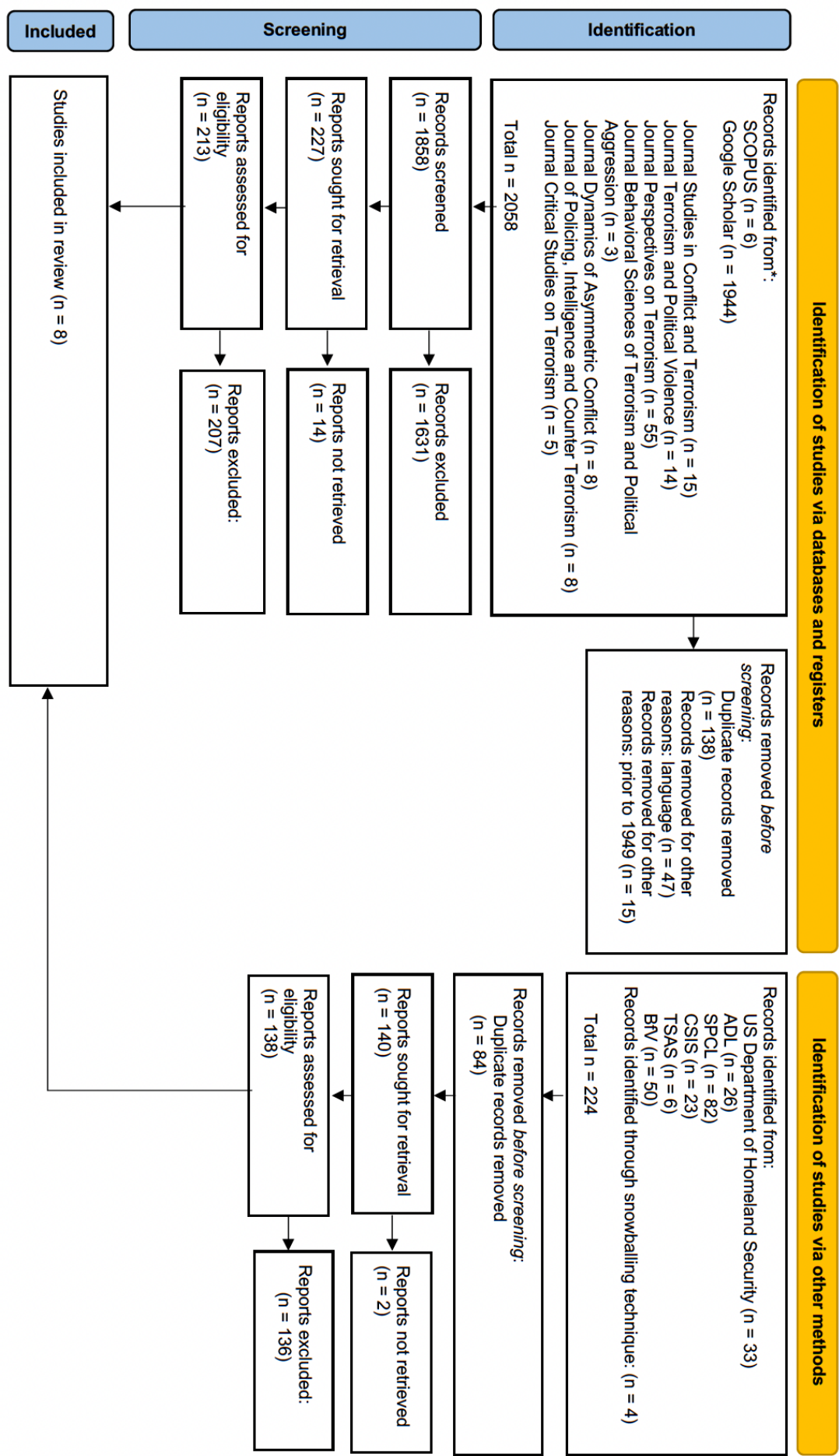


Table 1: Studies Included in This Literature Review

Authors	Country	Research Method	Sample	Research Subject	Data Resources	Assessed Variables / Information	Methodological Quality	External Validity
Parker, 2014	United States	Descriptive analysis	n = 9	US Sovereign Citizens undergoing court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations	Court records from Marion County	Competence to stand trial, age, sex, education degree, ethnic background, criminal record, biography, mental health history, criminal offenses	Superficial description of sample selection, no inclusion criteria, and criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to highly selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Keil, 2015	Germany	Descriptive analysis	n = 224	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter", known to the police of the federal state Brandenburg	Police data	Age, sex, criminal record	No description of sample selection, no inclusion criteria, criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Perry et al., 2017 Perry, 2018	Canada	Qualitative content analysis	n = 32	Canadian law enforcement officers, lawyers, judges, notaries (n=22) Canadian anti-authority adherents (n=10)	Semi-structured interviews	Structure, potential for violence	Transparency on sample selection but criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to highly selective sample, and qualitative approach
Keil, 2018	Germany	Descriptive analysis	n = 580	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter", known to the police of the federal state Brandenburg	Police data	Age, sex	No description of sample selection, no inclusion criteria, criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Paradis et al., 2018	US	Descriptive analysis and bivariate statistics	n = 36	New York City defendants who declared themselves as Sovereign Citizens undergoing court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations	Competence to stand trial reports at the Kings County Hospital Forensic Psychiatry Service of Brooklyn, New York	Competence to stand trial, age, sex, education degree, ethnic background, mental health problems	Transparency about search queries to identify cases; criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics

Table 1: Studies Included in This Literature Review (cont.)

Challacombe and Lucas, 2019	US	Bivariate statistics	n = 58	US individuals or groups associated with the sovereign citizen movement	Publicly available data on cases identified through press reports and releases, SPLC, Global Terrorism Database	Sex, violent or nonviolent criminal actions, TRAP-18 distal and proximal characteristics	Unclear sample description due to the unspecified number of individuals and groups; transparency about search queries, two raters with good interrater reliability; criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Fiebig and Koehler, 2019	Germany	Descriptive analyses	n = 487	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" who received press coverage in Germany	Systematic press research through LexisNexis, search terms "Reichsbürger", "Selbstverwalter"	Age, sex, employment status, criminal record, possible motivation, offences, victims	Transparency about search queries to identify cases, no information on inclusion criteria; criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
BfV, 2021	Germany	Descriptive analyses	n = 20,000	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" known to the BfV	Intelligence data	Age, sex	No transparency on sample selection and inclusion criteria due to nature of intelligence data	Generalizability due to targeted full survey, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics

Results

Apart from the information on the age and gender proportion of German sovereign citizens that the BfV provides, none of the identified eight studies offer representative results for the sovereign citizen movement as a whole. Rather, the empirical literature provides insights into the phenomenon from different perspectives using different research methods and highly selective, often small, samples. Most studies are based on descriptive analyses of the sample (five out of eight). Furthermore, two out of eight studies use bivariate statistics for comparative analyses. One study took a qualitative approach and used semi-structured interviews as data.

Demographics and Biography

In six of the eight identified empirical studies on sovereign citizens, they are described as middle-aged or older males.[34] The identified average age of sovereign citizen samples range from 38.7 to 50.0 years. The sovereign citizen samples are dominated by men. The proportion of women in the presented samples ranges from 0 to 25 percent.

In the two analyses based on court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations of sovereign citizens, their average age is about 39.[35] In a study of competence to stand trial reports conducted at the Kings County Hospital Forensic Psychiatry Service in Brooklyn, New York, Paradis et al. identified 36 male sovereign citizens but no females; their age ranged from 21 to 54.[36] In the Marion County court records analysis only one out of nine identified sovereign citizens was female.[37] In their study of German sovereign citizens who were covered by press reporting in the period from 2003 to 2018, Fiebig and Koehler had identified 487 sovereign citizens, who were on average 50 years old. Over 90 percent were 30 years and older and age ranged from 21 to 77. The proportion of women in this sample was 13.76 percent. The results of the studies based on police data are comparable. In samples of 224 and 540 German sovereign citizens known to the police in the federal state of Brandenburg, Germany, they were on average 50 years old and age ranged from 17 to 81. More than half of the samples were 51 years and older. In these studies, too, the proportion of men outweighed the proportion of women. The latter made up 21 percent and 22.6 percent of the samples, respectively. The most comprehensive survey of sovereign citizens by the BfV in Germany shows that the majority of the 20,000 German sovereign citizens are between 40 and 60 years old. The BfV identified the proportion of women at about 25 percent.

Three studies provide information on the education and employment status of sovereign citizens. The majority of the sovereign citizens considered in the court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations have at least a high school education. In Parker's study, "of the six defendants who completed the interview, all had passed the GED (General Educational Development) test or had graduated from high school, three had attended college, and one had a master's degree." [38] At the time of their arrest, three people were unemployed and three were self-employed. In the study by Paradis et al., information was available for 28 of the 36 sovereign citizens.[39] Five individuals (17.86 percent) did not have a high school diploma, 22 individuals (78.57 percent) had high school education, and one individual (3.57 percent) had a college degree or higher. In the analysis of German sovereign citizens identified through press coverage, information on the professional occupation learned or last held was recorded for 111 of 487 individuals.[40] Of these 111 individuals, 59.64 percent were identified as blue-collar workers and 40.54 percent as white-collar workers. Furthermore, information on 130 out of 487 German sovereign citizens reveals that 38.46 percent were reported as unemployed, 30.0 percent as employed and 31.54 percent as retired.

Looking at ethnic background, the studies of competence to stand trial evaluations by Parker [41] and Paradis et al. [42] report a proportion of African-American sovereign citizens of 67 percent and 91.67 percent, respectively. This indicates that primarily dark-skinned sovereign citizens were considered in the two analyses. However, because of the highly selective and small samples, no general conclusions can be drawn from this about the ethnic distribution across the sovereign citizen milieu as a whole.

Driving Factors for Radicalization

From the empirical studies identified, several driving factors appear to be of particular importance for radicalization into the sovereign citizen ideology. Through an analysis of press reporting, Fiebig and Koehler were able to gather information about a possible motivation for the crime for 156 of 487 sovereign citizens. [43] Financial difficulties were reported for 67.95 percent of these 156 individuals. In addition, 44.87 percent had work-related problems (e.g., insolvency), 12.18 percent had health problems, 10.90 percent had family difficulties, and 12.82 percent had a sense of injustice toward government regulations at the beginning of their radicalization—e.g., grievances regarding rejection of a construction permit.

Alongside this, Parker reports in the analysis of competence to stand trial evaluations that four out of six sovereign citizens experienced biographical breaks and violence in childhood: “two had experienced divorce at a young age, and one was raised by his mother. One of the six defendants was physically abused by his father and stepfather and another defendant witnessed serious trauma.”[44]

Two German studies provide some evidence that sovereign citizens tend to be socially isolated. They are often affected by unemployment or retirement and display little embeddedness in organized antigovernment groups.[45] Social isolation is even more pronounced among sovereign citizens who become involved in violent acts.[46] The proportion of unemployed and pensioners was larger in the sample of violent offenders, with 78.13 percent compared to the proportion of 67.13 percent in the sample of nonviolent offenders. Apart from that, Fiebig and Koehler found no relevant differences in demographics and biographical aspects between violent and nonviolent German sovereign citizens.[47]

However, due to the use of descriptive analyses only, all of these results should be interpreted as indications only. Whether there is a causal link between these driving factors on the one hand and radicalization as well as the committed offences on the other, is unclear.

Mental Health Issues

Sovereign citizens’ belief system as well as their unusual pseudo-legal speech and behavior in courtrooms may appear psychotic. However, findings from court-ordered evaluations regarding the competence to stand trial show that the assessed individuals “do not qualify for a diagnosis of a psychotic disorder based only on the nature of the shared beliefs.”[48] Parker found that only one out of a sample of six defendants who espoused sovereign citizens beliefs was incompetent to stand trial. This particular defendant was diagnosed with delusional disorder. Another defendant had recurrent depression and three other defendants showed substance abuse disorders. Nonetheless, Parker concluded that “sovereign citizens typically have the capacity to understand criminal proceedings and assist an attorney.”[49] Paradis et al. furthermore compared 36 sovereign citizen cases of competence to stand trial evaluations with 200 non-sovereign citizen cases of competence evaluations.[50] The authors report a significantly higher competency rate for the assessed sovereign citizens (70 percent) than for their comparison group (50 percent). In addition, sovereign citizens showed significantly fewer psychotic disorders, mood disorders, and substance abuse history than non-sovereign citizens in this study. Specifically, 11 of 36 sovereign citizens (31 percent) were diagnosed with a psychotic disorder during the competency to stand trial evaluation, six (17 percent) were diagnosed with a mood disorder, 11 (31 percent) had a history of substance abuse, and 13 (36 percent) did not receive a psychiatric diagnosis.

Behavior, Crimes, and Violence

When it comes to behavior, criminal acts and violence of sovereign citizens, the evidence base varies according to differences in the research methods and samples used. For example, Perry et al. used interviews with “law enforcement, lawyers, judges, notaries, and movement adherents (n=32),” as well as open-source data such as media reports and court documents, in order to assess the potential for violence by the Canadian anti-authority phenomenon.[51] On the basis of their qualitative data, the authors identify harassment and

intimidation of the movement's opponents, as well as defensive or reactionary violence directed towards law enforcement or other agents of the state, as most common forms of crime. In particular, law enforcement officers highlighted traffic stops as a primary context creating significant risk for potential violent conflicts. However, the authors see the risk for offensive violence only in individual cases as there was "general consensus—among both law enforcement and adherents in our study—that the anti-authority movement in Canada is not, by and large, a violent one." [52] It should be noted here that it is not clear from the study which results are based on the information provided by the movement adherents and which are based on the assessment of law enforcement and other interviewees.

With the focus on the subsample of German sovereign citizens who received press coverage, Fiebig and Koehler identified resistance against law enforcement officers as the most common act among this subsample (in 19.32 percent of the events in which sovereign citizens were involved). [53] Resisting usually occurred in the course of the execution of arrest warrants or distraints (64.54 percent) or during traffic stops (22.70 percent). The authors found coercion and extortion, as well as (administrative) offences relating to vehicle connected contexts (e.g., driving without a driver's license, driving without mandatory insurance, and fake license plates) as second and third most common acts in the sample. Similar to Perry et al. [54], Fiebig and Koehler [55] emphasized the reactive nature of these acts. (Administrative) offences arise in response to confrontation with law enforcement and other agents of the state, for example in response to received official documents, and during house searches or traffic stops. Although defensive or reactive in nature, these confrontations are indeed provoked by adherents' behavior and their belief system.

Based on police data from the German federal state of Brandenburg, Keil showed that the majority of registered sovereign citizens have no criminal record. [56] Only 30 percent of the persons had been charged with a criminal offense for at least the second time at the time of registration. In contrast, Parker revealed that "all of the defendants had prior arrest records and all but one had multiple prior arrests; two had served time in prison." [57] However, this result ought to be evaluated in the light of the specific sample, which consisted of nine sovereign citizens undergoing court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations.

Using the TRAP-18 risk assessment protocol, Challacombe and Lucas identified several proximal and distal variables to be predictive for violence within a sample of "United States-based individuals or groups associated with the sovereign citizen movement." [58] The authors showed that the identification with previous attackers or the desire to stand up for a special cause and belief system, the perception of personal grievance, the perception of violence as the only remaining solution, planning and intending violent acts, and a criminal history were predictors for the use of violence within their sample. Another relevant conclusion by the authors concerns the lack of a directly communicated threat in advance as a significant differentiator between violent and nonviolent sovereign citizens. They concluded that "violent sovereign citizens are often more impulsive on their actions." [59] This aligns with the previously elaborated reactive nature of the violent and nonviolent offences of sovereign citizens.

Discussion

In this article, we present a systematic literature review in order to provide an overview of the available evidence-based knowledge regarding sovereign citizens. Only eight empirical studies were identified that shed light on demographic and criminogenic factors of movement adherents. However, due to mainly small and specific samples, apart from German intelligence data, none of the assessed studies offers results that could be seen as representative for the sovereign citizen movement as a whole. This article shows that we are still in the very early stages of understanding who sovereign citizens really are and why they radicalize, as most articles on this extremist phenomenon examine ideology and strategies, or describe individual case studies.

Nonetheless, the systematic literature review reveals some noteworthy findings that ought to inform future research. Compared to other extremist movements or criminals in general, the higher average age and extremist radicalization in the second half of life represent a key characteristic of sovereign citizens. This find-

ing contrasts with consistent findings regarding the age-crime curve [60] as well as the age distribution of terrorist offenders.[61] The age-crime curve shows that the percentage of offenders in a population increases from late childhood to the teenage years and declines from the early 20s.[62] Factors assumed to influence desistance from offending behavior with increasing age are (among others) individual variations in self-control, changes in social risk and protective factors (e.g., embedding in a stable social environment, including the family and at work), and changing life circumstances (e.g., getting married, finding employment).[63] In contrast, many sovereign citizens appear to radicalize and engage in criminal behavior at older ages after biographical breaks and the loss of protective factors. For example, in their systematic literature review on protective factors against extremist radicalization, Lösel et al. identified employment and ownership of residential property as key protective factors.[64] In the case of sovereign citizens, on the other hand, financial difficulties due to insolvency, unemployment and debt, and the associated loss of property, play a prominent role in their radicalization trajectories. In addition, a sense of injustice towards governmental actions also appears to be a central radicalization factor among sovereign citizens.[65] These initial indications of possible causes of sovereign citizen radicalization could support the hypothesis that “at its core, the Sovereign Citizen movement is about the (re)acquisition of power by those who feel powerless.”[66] As Hodge points out, sovereign citizen ideology convinces its adherents that “the frustration they feel at being subject to state authority and administration and the vulnerability they experience in the shifting economic fortunes of an increasingly globalized economy are in fact evidence of oppression and the impetus to change.”[67] The identification of these relevant radicalization factors can be an important clue for the development of prevention measures. However, to gain a better understanding of the driving factors behind the radicalization processes of sovereign citizens and radicalization processes in old age in general, future research needs to be conducted in this area, for example via qualitative interviews and longitudinal studies with affected individuals.

The findings from the systematic literature review on mental health of sovereign citizens are very limited but seem to align with the most current literature on the impact of mental health problems on extremist radicalization and behavior. Many different factors that can interact in different ways to promote radicalization into violent extremism are well-known. Mental health problems can be one of them. However, extremist radicalization and behavior cannot be equated with mental health disorders.[68] Although sovereign citizens’ beliefs and behavior are oftentimes perceived as confused or even psychotic,[69] sovereign citizens’ court-ordered evaluations show that the majority of them are classified as competent to stand trial and that sovereign citizens do not display greater mental health problems in comparison to other criminals.[70] Rather, Hodge sees the radicalization of sovereign citizens as deploying “a radical concept of citizenship, rooted in conspirational thinking and often in direct conflict with the state to help manage status anxiety and uncertainty.”[71] However, as conspiracy theories play an important role in sovereign citizens’ ideology, it may be worthwhile to examine the impact of ideology and engagement on adherents’ mental health. As Pytyck and Chaimowitz stressed, “there is an inherent conspirational or paranoid aspect” in sovereign citizens’ ideology.[72] Belief in conspiracy theories has previously been linked to stress, anxiety, feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and disillusionment, and distrust in institutions and authorities [73] (among other factors), and thus may have an impact on sovereign citizens’ mental health. However, due to the correlational nature of these studies, the causal direction of these associations is not yet clear.

Nevertheless, research findings show that these negative feelings connected to the belief in conspiracy theories have an impact on individuals’ behavior, leading (for example) to lower vaccination intentions [74] or increased tendency toward ordinary crimes.[75] Combined with a key finding of the systematic literature review that criminal behavior by sovereign citizens largely occurs in response to prior contact with authorities and state representatives, this may explain why sovereign citizens primarily legitimize violent confrontation as mere self-defense. Conspiracy theories about a supposedly illegitimate state enriching itself at the expense of its citizens, deceitfully forcing them into contracts and thus enslaving them, may lead to feelings such as anxiety and thus provoke self-defense reflexes. The reactive nature of many acts by sovereign citizens is particularly evident in violent attacks on law enforcement officers. The systematic literature review reveals that violent crimes are not actively committed by sovereign citizens without a specific cause. Rather, they

occur in response to the enforcement of governmental regulations and authority, such as arrest warrants, evictions, or traffic stops.[76] Due to their ideology, sovereign citizens judge these enforcement acts as unlawful encroachments. However, it must be emphasized that those sovereign citizens naturally provoke state action through their own behavior.

The aforementioned perceptions related to a belief in conspiracy theories might have greater impact on sovereign citizens who are socially isolated, because support from a group is missing. Although the results of the literature review on this point must be viewed with caution, two German studies provide information on violent sovereign citizens who appear to be more socially isolated when compared to non-violent ones.[77] Beyond these findings, it is still largely unknown which factors cause violent behavior in sovereign citizens.

Limitations and Future Directions

Since only English- and German-language literature was considered, there is a possibility that relevant empirical studies on sovereign citizens in other languages were overlooked. In addition, this review is limited to studies from the U.S., Canada, and Germany. It is possible that the search terms used to identify empirical studies on demographics and criminogenic factors of sovereign citizens excluded relevant studies from other countries that have comparable ideological groups and individuals but use different terms to describe them.

The systematic literature review showed that there is not only a significant shortage of empirical studies in this field but in addition, only the results regarding age and sex based on intelligence data from the BfV in Germany lead to generalizable knowledge about movement adherents. The other seven studies are severely limited due to small or highly specific samples. In addition, most empirical studies to date have not moved beyond descriptive analyses, so that we can only speculate about explanatory factors for radicalization processes or the use of violence by sovereign citizens. It is clear that future research is necessary in order to attain a better understanding of *who* sovereign citizens are, *what* their radicalization processes look like, and *which* factors might predict the use of violence. Only then can effective countermeasures as well as preventative safeguards be developed and adequately established.

This article focused on demographic and criminogenic factors of sovereign citizens and therefore predominantly on the individual level. However, anti-government extremism has also led to violence at a societal level, as seen most recently in the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, as well as in the sometimes-violent protests against the protective measures against Covid introduced in many Western countries, where sovereign citizens—among other anti-government extremists—were and are using the Covid pandemic to mobilize others against the state. This shows the importance of studying this diverse set of actors, ideologies and movements further, to better predict, understand, and prevent such incidents in the future.

In conclusion, it must be stated that the results of this systematic literature review should be seen as a first step forward, which should be (re-)examined in more detail in further empirical research. In doing so, it is important to choose methodologically advanced study designs. Moreover, since sovereign citizens differ greatly from other extremists in some respects (for example, regarding average age), previously established theories of radicalization and disengagement cannot be transferred to them without significant caveats.

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