Countering Violent Extremism Interventions: Contemporary Research

FULL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evidence base informing countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions is limited. However, there has been an increase in empirical research exploring the design and delivery of interventions in recent years. These studies are complemented by a growing body of research analysing processes of engagement in, and disengagement from, violent extremism which can help inform interventions. This report reviews the key themes emerging from these two related literatures over the past 12 months, as well as lessons drawn from international case studies. These themes are:

- The use of former extremists in interventions and radicalisation research

- The social ecology of interventions

- Community reporting

- Online interventions

- Intervention practice: lessons from international case studies

- Emerging research agendas: gendered approaches to intervention; idiosyncratic and emerging ideologies; and the impact of COVID-19 on counter-terrorism and CVE practice

In exploring these themes, this report outlines a series of implications for policy and practice in relation to secondary and tertiary CVE interventions and identifies key evidence gaps. The effectiveness of CVE interventions remains poorly understood and publicly available research that draws on the experiences of those receiving support from interventions is sparse. However, several important findings can be drawn from this literature, alongside recommendations for those working in this area.

KEY FINDINGS

- Former extremists are increasingly being used to deliver offline and online interventions, but the effectiveness of these interventions remains poorly understood.

- Interviews with formers reinforce existing knowledge about the push and pull factors that contribute to engagement in, and disengagement from, extremism. Recent research has drawn attention to key drivers of disengagement including disillusionment with extremist movements and social-ecological factors such as the availability of alternative social networks.

- Disillusionment can be driven by a variety of factors including a sense of frustration with the group's leadership or their lack of progress in achieving stated goals; burnout; the group no longer meeting the 'core need' (such as a search for identity) that motivated initial engagement; and concerns about the use of violence against civilians or other group members.

- Insights from formers highlight the importance of social-ecological and contextual factors. In the absence of pro-social relationships with family members or friends outside of the movement, individuals, even those who are disillusioned, are less likely to disengage.

- Multi-disciplinary interventions that target a range of social-ecological factors are increasingly being used around the world to support those at risk of being radicalised and to facilitate disengagement and deradicalisation and have produced some promising early results.

- Communities can be willing to support efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism and to make referrals, but they need to be supported to do so effectively. Some countries are pursuing efforts to

use interventions to build community resilience so that communities can more effectively support individuals who may be at risk of being radicalised.

- There is some evidence that online interventions can be effective, but this evidence base is very limited. More research is needed to understand the opportunities and limitations of the online space, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Counter-messaging campaigns are more effective at influencing some audiences than others. A recent systematic review suggested that counter-narratives might be effective at tackling the early stages of radicalisation, but less able to challenge the views of those who support violence.

- Determining the effectiveness of different interventions remains difficult based on the available evidence. However, UK and international case studies reinforce the idea that best practice involves offering tailored multi-agency interventions that are designed to address the specific individual and ecological risk factors identified in individual cases.

- Practice-based challenges remain, including the difficulty of standardising how risk is assessed, and in ensuring multi-agency coordination.

- Several promising research agendas have begun to emerge around gendered approaches to interventions; idiosyncratic ideologies; and the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CVE. However, the evidence base underpinning this research is limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTION DESIGN AND DELIVERY

WORKING WITH AND LEARNING FROM FORMERS

- It is important to understand the background and position of someone with a history of violent extremism to interpret their potential role in interventions. Considerations when engaging formers in this work include their likely credibility in the eyes of the target audience; the extent to which they have specialist knowledge of the specific ideology or movement that the intervention is focused on; the potential emotional or physical risks they might face; and their motivations for engaging in intervention work.

- Formers typically require training to engage in intervention work. Training should foster the requisite pedagogical and emotional skills to ensure that this work is delivered most effectively, and so that it does not negatively impact on formers themselves.

- The experiences of former members of violent extremist organisations can help inform interventions. While past narratives of engagement and disengagement can have limitations (e.g. recall and hindsight biases), a deeper understanding of the factors that facilitated individual processes of engagement and disengagement from violent extremism, and those factors that constrained both processes, has the potential to improve existing interventions.

- Interventions that encourage disillusionment and counter-narrative campaigns that draw on the disillusionment of current or former members could be effective, provided they are agile enough to respond to what may be fleeting moments of disillusionment.

- Interventions should pay close attention to the core needs or functions being met through engagement

in extremism and try to identify pro-social ways of addressing them.

- Involvement in violent extremism and viewing or experiencing violence first-hand can have psychological impacts that intervention providers should try to address, particularly concerning returnees from Syria and Iraq.

- Individual processes of disengagement seem to differ according to the role that individuals hold within violent extremist groups. Intervention providers will therefore benefit from having a clear understanding of the role an individual held in a violent extremist group.

DELIVERING MULTI-AGENCY SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

- Interventions often focus on tackling individual vulnerabilities to radicalisation. Alongside this, they must also address social-ecological factors. Multi-disciplinary interventions are increasingly being used around the world to address individual risk factors as well as contextual and structural factors, such as socio-economic or political barriers to pro-social, legal behaviour.

- Focusing on the immediate context in which an at-risk individual lives – for example, by building community resilience or fostering dialogue between different communities – has the potential to support preventative efforts.

- Social-ecological interventions that focus on community resilience can potentially overcome challenges faced by secondary intervention providers. Fostering preventative skills within peer networks can help to reach individuals that the authorities or other providers are unable to reach.

- The specific contexts in which tertiary interventions are delivered can produce practical constraints, particularly when there are time and staff shortages. Directly engaging with providers who work within these constraints, and learning from their experiences, would potentially help to develop innovative ways to overcome these issues.

- Disengagement and desistance programmes will benefit from a holistic approach that ensures, as far as possible, that the social-ecological factors that can support effective re-integration – including familial and community support – are in place.

- It is important for providers working with those on parole to build trust with the parolee and their family; provide adequate training and support for families who may be unsure how best to engage with the parolee; and, where necessary, take steps to prevent the parolee from re-engaging with peers or family members who may have contributed to their radicalisation.

- Expertise from a variety of fields, such as research on refugees and war-impacted communities, could be used to inform interventions for reintegrating returnees from Syria and Iraq. Given the sensitivities around this issue, it is important to carefully communicate the aims of such programmes, as, without the buy-in of the local community, re-integration efforts seem more likely to fail.

ENCOURAGING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND REPORTING

- Individuals are willing to raise concerns about family members and friends under the right circumstances, but they require support when doing so. Just as campaigns such as Action Counters Terrorism (ACT) provide advice and support for individuals in the pre-reporting stage, it is important that individuals feel supported in the post-reporting stage. This might involve being updated about the individual they have reported or being offered support to deal with any emotional or psychological effects of making the report. Ensuring that reporters, and those they report, are treated in a procedurally just way is also important.

- Engaging community stakeholders in the design, as well as the delivery of interventions, helps to enhance perceptions that counter-radicalisation policy and practice is procedurally just.

ONLINE INTERVENTIONS

- Online interventions are a potentially important part of a broader intervention toolkit, but more research is needed to understand their effectiveness and the limits of their impact.

- More formal training on how to conduct P/CVE work online is needed. Offline intervention providers are increasingly conducting work online. However, this work has often been ad hoc and uncoordinated. Effective training for providers in how to use online tools and integrate online and offline approaches will be important.

- The existing functionality of mainstream websites such as Facebook and Twitter can be used to reach a potentially large audience of at-risk individuals.

- A more targeted and tailored approach is necessary if providers are to successfully engage individuals through alternative platforms and challenge content posted on such sites.

- More work is needed to develop robust methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of online interventions and counter-narrative campaigns that go beyond reporting what has been described as 'vanity metrics' that focus on reach rather than impact.

- The content of counter-messages and the type of person who delivers them influences their impact. To be effective, the content of messages must resonate with the target audience, and the messenger needs to be seen as credible.

- Participatory methods, which involve target groups in the development and delivery of counter-messages, could be useful in enhancing credibility and resonance.

ASSESSING AND MANAGING RISK

- Risk assessment needs to be a holistic process. Professionals using risk assessment tools require adequate training in how to identify and assess risk using existing frameworks, and how to triangulate risk assessments with different forms of data.

- Those undertaking risk assessment benefit from a professional culture that holds them accountable while simultaneously providing enough support and guidance to discourage an overly risk-averse approach.

TACKLING IDEOLOGY

- Those assessing the risks posed by individuals motivated by different ideologies require an understanding of the nuances that exist between and within different ideological positions.

- In many cases, interventions will likely need to meet the basic needs of individuals before providers can tackle their specific ideological beliefs.

- Tailored and flexible interventions will likely be particularly important when engaging individuals motivated by mixed, unstable, or idiosyncratic ideologies. Further research is needed to understand the distinctiveness (or lack thereof) of these ideologies (and of the individuals motivated by them), how and why these belief systems emerge, and how best to tackle them.

INTRODUCTION

The evidence base informing CVE interventions is nascent but growing. Studies exploring the experiences of policy-makers, practitioners, communities, and, in some cases, recipients of interventions, have provided valuable insights into how interventions are being delivered. While much of this research is descriptive and says little about intervention effectiveness, it has identified areas of good practice and lessons for intervention designers and providers.

If interventions are to be effective, the underlying assumptions about the processes of engagement and disengagement must be sound. Journeys into and out of extremism are known to be highly individualised. Empirical research into these processes can be used to better inform interventions by identifying relevant 'push' and 'pull' factors, as well as potential barriers that might prevent engagement in, or disengagement from, violent extremism.

This report draws together key insights from empirical research on interventions focused on individuals identified as being at risk of radicalisation (secondary interventions) or those who are already engaged in violent extremism (tertiary interventions), as well as empirical research into processes of engagement[1] and disengagement. The report aims to review the most contemporary research relevant to interventions and focuses on research published from January 2020 onwards, although where relevant, it draws on studies published outside of this period. The analysis is international in scope and discusses research from UK and international contexts, most notably Scandinavia, Australia, and South-East Asia.

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1   CVE interventions are often categorised using a public health model (Marsden, Knott and Lewis, 2017). Whereas primary interventions have a broad focus, secondary interventions are more targeted and delivered to those at risk of becoming involved in, or already involved in, violent extremism. Tertiary interventions are the most targeted interventions and refer to disengagement or deradicalisation programmes in post-conviction settings.

THE USE OF FORMERS IN INTERVENTIONS AND RESEARCH

This section reviews two themes in contemporary research. It first analyses recent literature on the use of former violent extremists in the delivery of interventions, before discussing key learnings from recent studies of engagement and disengagement that could help inform intervention design and delivery

[T]he available literature on the role of formers in CVE work is very limited and not based on a solid evidence base.
(Koehler, 2020a)

THE USE OF FORMERS IN INTERVENTIONS

KEY POINTS

- Formers are increasingly used to deliver interventions. However, the available evidence makes it difficult to assess their efficacy in facilitating disengagement and/or preventing engagement.

- The credibility and knowledge held by formers can be (and has been) a useful tool when delivering interventions. However, it is important not to generalise about their effectiveness. The individual former may no longer be credible to members of their former movement, and their credibility may be undermined if they are motivated by financial gain or publicity. Furthermore, individuals may be knowledgeable about their own experiences but may lack knowledge of the wider movement.

- Although limited, the existing evidence suggests that interventions using formers in educational and online contexts can be effective, but more research is needed.

Practitioners and researchers have long spoken of the potential utility of formers in CVE interventions, and several 'good practice' guides on this issue have been

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BOX 1

The challenges in using formers in school-based interventions in Germany

Gansewig and Walsh (2021) conducted one of the most comprehensive reviews to date of the use of formers in preventative interventions by analysing 151 newspaper articles (published between 2001 and 2019) on 133 lectures given by former extremists in German schools.

The authors conclude that, under the right conditions (i.e. when targeted at the right groups of young people and delivered by appropriate providers), such interventions 'could serve as a complementary instrument of school prevention'. However, they also identify several common issues in the content of such lectures, including hindsight bias (i.e. formers tended to construct a more favourable image of their past); the use of inappropriate language and the glorification of violence; and the ulterior motives of some formers, who seemingly used sessions for publicity and financial gain.

published.[2] Formers interviewed by Scrivens et al. (2019) have also argued that they could play a key role in delivering interventions in this space.

Despite the appetite for engaging with formers, the effectiveness of interventions using those with a history of violent extremism is poorly understood. Only a handful of studies have evaluated their efficacy and these studies report mixed results. This section describes the opportunities and challenges of engaging with formers and considers the implications for practice.

BENEFITS OF FORMERS UNDERTAKING INTERVENTION WORK

Formers are perceived to have credibility in the eyes of their target audience, and to hold knowledge about their former movement that could be leveraged in interventions (Tapley and Clubb, 2019). This knowledge is valued by practitioners. For example, practitioners working in a Swedish EXIT programme interviewed by Christensen (2015) argued that the knowledge of formers, some of whom were now employed by the programme having formerly been clients, had been invaluable to their work. In the UK context, there is some historical precedent for the use of formers, with former combatants playing a key role in delivering peacebuilding work in Northern Ireland (Flack and Ferguson, 2020).

Different 'types' of formers will have different levels of credibility and knowledge that will likely influence the role that they are able to play in interventions. More theoretical studies have suggested that the extent to which an individual has been deradicalised will shape their potential role (Tapley and Clubb, 2019):

- Deradicalised formers may be able to develop more persuasive counter-narratives for primary interventions because they have rejected extremist ideology. They may be well-placed to support individuals considering disengaging through

tertiary interventions as they have lived experience of the challenges associated with moving away from extremism.

- Disengaged formers, including those who have not been fully deradicalised, have played a key role in post-conflict settings, including Northern Ireland, and may retain higher levels of authority and credibility because of their continued support of the movement.

The appropriateness of using formers who have not deradicalised in interventions is context-dependent (Tapley and Clubb, 2019). Research from Northern Ireland found that retaining an 'active extremist identity' was crucial in motivating 35 former Loyalist paramilitaries to deliver conflict transformation work (Flack and Ferguson, 2020). The authors of this study argue that in some contexts, efforts to deradicalise formers might be counterproductive. Further, interventions which enable formers to appreciate how the context (e.g. conflict or post-conflict) should inform their approach to furthering the aims of the group might be beneficial (Ferguson and McAuley, 2020). However, the extent to which such experiences translate to interventions tackling other violent movements is debatable.

The experiences of formers can be used to inform intervention design as well as delivery. Most of the ten former white supremacists interviewed by Scrivens et al. (2019) noted that intervention from family members or friends or educational initiatives might have prevented their radicalisation. Seven respondents also said that formal disengagement interventions would have helped them to leave extremism and that communicating with a former would have been particularly useful. Without such support, they instead had to reach out to friends and family members. However, it is difficult to know whether interventions that formers suggest may have been helpful would actually have worked (Koehler, 2020a).

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2   See guides produced by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN, 2017a) and Hedayah (2017).

CHALLENGES TO WORKING WITH FORMERS

There are potential limitations in using formers (Walsh and Gansewig, 2019; Koehler, 2020a). Formers may:

- Exhibit a lack of critical self-reflection or incomplete deradicalisation

- Have received insufficient training

- Be an expert of their own biography but lack knowledge of wider extremist environments

- Be primarily motivated by financial incentives or the profile that comes with the role

- Focus on violence and fear to achieve a deterrence effect (e.g. in workshops they deliver)

There are different risks to working with different types of formers. Deradicalised formers who have rejected their former movement may be seen as traitors by those who are entrenched in the ideology, which may make them less effective in delivering tertiary interventions. Disengaged, rather than deradicalised formers may feel less able to criticise the movement, while their involvement may have counterproductive effects, such as marginalising victims, or the inadvertent glorification of past violence (Tapley and Clubb, 2019).

It is important not to generalise about the potential effectiveness of formers. Tapley and Clubb (2019) argue that the positive impact formers had on conflict transformation in Northern Ireland was 'context-dependent', as it rested on several structural factors that may not always be present. In Northern Ireland, this included formers holding a valued position within their communities, and funding being made available for conflict transformation work from bodies such as the European Union.

Formers are not uniform. It is important to distinguish between the agency of formers as a role type and the agency of the individuals themselves (Tapley and Clubb, 2019). Just because one individual is effective

at delivering an intervention does not mean that all formers will be.

Formers' experiences may not resonate with intervention recipients given the individualised nature of the disengagement process (Koehler, 2020a). Formers draw on their experience to deliver interventions (Christensen, 2015); describe how they think violent extremism should be tackled (Scrivens et al., 2019); challenge the assumptions underpinning existing interventions such as Channel (Pettinger, 2020a); and some have suggested that speaking to a former would have been useful to them (Scrivens et al., 2019). However, the perceptions and experiences of the small samples of former extremists that have been interviewed for existing studies are unlikely to reflect all members of violent movements.

The credibility of formers is considered important to their potential to inform positive change. Formers argue that credible formers – those that have put 'emotional time' into a movement – could be effective intervention providers (Scrivens et al., 2019), but also note that some formers lack credibility. A former's credibility may be undermined by the exaggerated claims they make about their former role or may be damaged by post-exit life struggles, such as alcohol or drug dependency (Koehler, 2020a).

Perceptions that formers are motivated by profit has the potential to undermine their capacity to engage with intervention participants. While this issue has not been explored empirically, Koehler (2020a) calls the rise of the 'professional former' a 'worrying development within the countering violent extremism (CVE) field in recent years'. This speaks to concerns about the efficacy of formers who might be seeking to profit from their pasts in some way as identified by Gansewig and Walsh (2021) in their review of the 151 newspaper articles on lectures delivered by formers in Germany (see *Box 1*).

Undertaking intervention work carries risks for formers and such work mustn't impinge on the

former's rehabilitation. Being a former can become a career and inform the development of a new identity (RAN, 2017a) in ways which might not be helpful, bringing with it 'the risk of being trapped in the role of former [extremist], which in itself creates a new trauma' (Mattson and Johansson, 2020). While this has not been explored empirically, there is a risk that asking formers to revisit their extremist pasts 'might prevent and counteract one of the most central goals of deradicalization programs, which is the maximum reintegration of extremists and terrorists' (Koehler, 2016).

The former's decision to deliver interventions must be voluntary and informed. Not all of those who disengage are willing to publicly discuss their extremist past, and those who are should understand the potential risks of doing so (RAN, 2017a). For example, intervention providers have described how going public about their own extremist past led to threats of reprisals from extremists (Davey et al., 2019)

Stigma plays a complex role for formers. Mattsson and Johansson's (2020) interviews with 15 former [violent extremist] found that six were unwilling to go public about their extremist pasts for fear of stigmatisation, while the remaining nine respondents had shared their experiences and/or delivered EXIT work in an attempt to be 'destigmatised'. For them, public disengagement informed their deradicalisation. In contrast, those who disengaged privately were less likely to be deradicalised than those who had disengaged more publicly, although it is unclear whether there was any causal link.

EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE-BASE

While evaluations of interventions using formers are rare, a handful of studies have evaluated the effectiveness of school-based (*Box 2*) and online interventions (*Box 3*) using formers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For formers to participate in CVE, they require the psychological and pedagogical skills to do so effectively and safely. Formers benefit from the support of other organisations to enable them to engage in interventions (Scrivens et al., 2019). Davey et al. (2018) propose that to address the challenge that formers often 'lack the long-term support required to professionalize and scale-up their efforts' they need adequate support and training, for example in 'social work, trust-building techniques and talking therapy techniques, including on the importance of demonstrating a non-judgemental approach'.

LEARNING FROM NARRATIVES OF ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT

KEY POINTS

- Interviews with formers support existing knowledge about the importance of push and pull factors in processes of engagement and disengagement. This knowledge could be used to inform intervention design and delivery.

- Key factors contributing to engagement include psychosocial vulnerabilities; influence from peers or family members; specific trigger events; a desire to meet a core need, such as a search for identity; and perceived or actual experiences of discrimination.

- An important push factor contributing to disengagement is disillusionment with violent extremist movements. Disillusionment can be driven by a sense of frustration with the group leadership or their progress in achieving goals; burnout; and concerns about the use of violence against civilians or other group members. Interventions that encourage disillusionment and counter-narrative campaigns that draw on the disillusionment of current or former members could be effective, provided they are agile enough

to respond to what may be fleeting moments of disquiet.

- A key pull factor is the availability of alternative social networks. Individuals, even those who have become disillusioned, are less likely to disengage from violent extremist movements when they lack pro-social relationships with individuals outside of the movement. Intervention providers can facilitate disengagement or prevent engagement by building these pro-social relationships with individuals themselves, or by helping individuals build positive relationships with others.

- Interventions should take account of the contextual factors that both facilitate and inhibit disengagement from violent extremism, such as supportive social networks outside of extremist groups and socio-economic opportunities available to former extremists (or lack thereof).

- Interventions should pay close attention to the core needs or functions being met through engagement

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BOX 2

Educational interventions using formers

The evidence supporting the use of formers in educational interventions is mixed. Two recent studies evaluated the impact of such interventions, and produced somewhat contrasting conclusions:

A recent randomised control trial concluded that 'utilising former extremists can be a powerful tool in efforts to prevent and counter radicalization' (Parker and Lindekilde, 2020).

- *A survey of 1,931 secondary school students in Denmark measured the impact of workshops delivered by a pool of approximately 12 former extremists.*

- *The workshops increased self-reported confidence in being able to respond to extremism and significantly decreased belief in the legitimacy of political violence.*

- *There was no significant impact on other measures such as perceived political efficacy or ability to recognise extremist recruitment techniques.*

- *Interestingly, the workshops significantly reduced political tolerance. The authors suggested this might be driven by attendees coming to believe that 'groups that they and most people disagree with should not be tolerated and left free to maneuver (sic)' after hearing how formers had been exploited or misled by these groups.*

In contrast, a similar study found that school workshops delivered by a former right-wing extremist in Germany had limited impact on young people (Walsh and Gansewig, 2019).

- *A survey of 564 pupils found that the workshop had no significant impact on, among other metrics, the prevalence of right-wing attitudes. The authors argue this was unsurprising as 'it was not to be expected that the views or behaviour of the participants would change because of a single implementation of a three-hour prevention measure'. They concluded that this work needs to be more embedded in the curriculum if it is to be effective.*

BOX 3

Online interventions using formers

Formers are increasingly being used in counter-narrative campaigns, but their impact is poorly understood. Those studies which have sought to understand their effects seem to suggest that formers can be effective messengers in delivering counter-narratives but that the nature of the message and messenger influence their success.

Bélanger et al. (2020) analysed the impact that different message content (social, political, or religious) and messengers (US government, Imam, or IS defector) had on support for IS through a survey of 886 American Muslims. As this sample was not representative of the population as a whole nor of individuals who are often identified as being at risk from radicalisation, these results should be treated with caution as they cannot be generalised. However, they are illustrative:

- *The defector was the most effective at reducing support among the sample, regardless of message content. Regardless of messenger, a political message was most effective.*

- *Religious counter-narratives from all three messengers had a counterproductive impact on those identified as being at risk of radicalisation – defined as those who had a high need for cognitive closure – as did the social counter-narrative when delivered by an Imam or an IS defector.*

Focus groups with Somali-American women (n=5) and men (n=5) explored the impact that a counter-narrative video featuring an imprisoned IS defector had on a range of measures, including opinions towards IS (Speckhard et al., 2020a):

- *As all respondents were negative towards IS before seeing the video, it had no significant impact on them. However, respondents felt the video would be effective in reaching those with neutral or positive views towards IS. Nine said it made them think more negatively about violent extremist groups, and eight said that it could convince someone thinking of joining a violent extremist group to not do so.*

Davey et al. (2018) evaluated an intervention involving different intervention providers (formers, professional counsellors, and survivors) reaching out to individuals through Facebook Messenger. Formers effectively engaged with individuals identified as being at risk, but lacked time to do so:

- *Owing to time constraints, formers were able to engage in fewer conversations than other providers but were more likely to get an initial response.*

- *Professional counsellors were able to deliver more conversations as they could devote more time to the project, while survivors were most likely to demonstrate sustained engagement.*

in extremism and try to identify pro-social ways of addressing them.

- Involvement in violent extremism and viewing or experiencing violence first-hand can have psychological impacts that interventions should consider.

- Individual processes of disengagement differ according to the role that individuals hold within violent extremist groups. Providers facilitating disengagement will therefore benefit from having a clear understanding of the role an individual held in a violent extremist group.

The experiences of formers can provide evidence to support the development of interventions. As an example, Pettinger (2020a) outlined how insights from former combatants in Northern Ireland could be better utilised within the Prevent strategy. Although there are inevitably challenges reaching and securing the agreement of formers to be interviewed (Necef, 2021), several studies have overcome this issue to derive empirical insights into individual processes of engagement and disengagement, as well as potential barriers to disengagement. This section reviews key insights from this literature and highlights their implications for policy and practice.

ENGAGEMENT

Interventions must address the complex range of factors that inform the radicalisation process. Several studies have drawn on the experiences of individuals travelling to Syria and Iraq to explore the range of factors that contributed to their radicalisation. These are largely in line with existing analyses of push and pull factors described in previous research. For example:

- Speckhard and Ellenberg's (2020) interviews with 220 ISIS returnees, defectors and prisoners identified a range of factors that interviewees claimed had contributed to their decision to travel. This included psychosocial vulnerabilities, social media (with 8.2% claiming that they were solely

radicalised online), or the influence of a friend (35.7% of males and 13.2% of females). Over half (55.3%) of women claimed that they had been influenced by a spouse or partner.

- Neve et al. (2020) drew on police records, documents, and interviews with local practitioners to explore factors contributing to the radicalisation of a group of twenty people who travelled to Syria from one Dutch city. While their findings are limited as they do not engage with the individuals directly, they identify a range of potential drivers including local deprivation, the presence of persons with earlier ties to jihadist networks, and individual trigger events.

Interventions should pay close attention to the core needs or functions being met through engagement in extremism and try and identify pro-social ways of addressing them. Fisher-Smith et al. (2020) identify the presence of a 'core need' in their interviews with eight former white supremacists. This need was the 'background motivator of entry, disengagement, exit, and ultimately deradicalization':

- Interviewees had initially joined an extremist organisation to serve this 'core need', such as a search for identity. This need receded into the background once it was met.

- There was the potential for the core need to be destabilised when they experienced something that caused them to question their identity, for example, because of a trigger event that led to them doubting the movement or a relationship established outside of the movement.

- When individuals began to question their identity, it led to an identity vacuum as the core need was not being met. Participants adopted coping mechanisms to deal with this experience such as using scripted language as they worked out their new identity or forming 'bridging relationships' with other groups or EXIT staff.

- While deradicalisation was rare, these individuals became less reliant on coping mechanisms once they began to address their core needs in other ways. For example, one individual, whose core need had been a desire for efficacy and competence, had entered higher education.

While disengagement is not a mirror image of engagement, there are parallels between these processes, which suggests that disengagement can be supported by meeting the needs that drove engagement. Interviews in Germany with seven intervention providers and five individuals who had disengaged from Islamist extremist and Salafist ideologies at an early stage of radicalisation found a desire to belong could both drive radicalisation and deradicalisation, as could a quest for structure and purpose (Reiter et al., 2020). Relatedly, in a recent systematic review of mentorship in CVE, Winterbotham (2020a) discusses a UK-based educational intervention and a sports-based mentorship programme in Australia that were both seemingly effective in meeting young people's needs for belonging and identity.

Individuals may disengage from violent extremism when they feel that the core need that drove their engagement is no longer being met by their involvement in the extremist group. In the same study cited above, Reiter et al. (2020) found that the 'realization that the extremist ideas or groups one has been engaging with are not serving the expected purpose, that is, do not fulfil the needs intended to fulfil (sic), or they are violating other pivotal needs' was a key driver of disengagement.

Recent empirical studies have drawn attention to the emotional aspects of radicalisation, which may be relevant in developing interventions. Ljamai (2020) analyses the role that psychological vulnerability played in the radicalisation of 18 individuals now participating in a deradicalisation programme in Amsterdam. This study outlines how young people went through three different stages of fear, corresponding to the 'staircase model' of radicalisation. The author argues that by linking different forms of anxiety to different stages of

> *A correct diagnosis of the forms of anxiety experienced by radical Muslim youths can greatly contribute to the effective impact of de-radicalization programs.*
>
> *(Ljamai, 2020)*

radicalisation, we 'know better at what emotional level any interventions for deradicalisation must take place':

- Fear of victimisation (Staircase Phase 1: Sensitivity to ideology)

- Feelings of guilt/ responsibility to protect Muslims (Staircase Phase 2: Join ideological group)

- Feelings of hatred and revenge (Staircase Phase 3: Willing to act on behalf of group ideology)

Intervention designers and providers would benefit from understanding how best to tackle factors that sustain engagement in extremist movements, as well as those that inhibit disengagement. Drawing on interviews with 110 former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, Ferguson and McAuley (2020) identified five factors that sustained engagement:

- Joining a militant organisation had led to growing moral ambiguity and isolation, as well as dehumanisation of their perceived enemy

- Being a militant became an all-encompassing identity

- Militancy provided them with a sense of purpose and efficacy

- A belief that violence could bring about political change

- The presence of ongoing community support.

Involvement in violent extremism can have psychological impacts that interventions should

consider. Recent studies in different contexts have suggested the following effects are relevant:

- Former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland (Bont, 2020) and former members of IS (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2020) have spoken of the trauma of witnessing the effects of violence first-hand.

- Corner and Gill (2020) found 'that the experiences of being engaged in a terrorist group negatively impact on the mental health of a subset of individuals'. Based on an analysis of 97 autobiographical accounts from 91 people, they found that psychological distress was reported in 23.1% prior to engagement; rising to 45.9% during engagement and 41.9% post-engagement.

- A recent case study of Kosovo's approach to repatriating and reintegrating 110 female and child returnees (Ruf and Jansen, 2019) found that a large proportion were suffering from PTSD. Tackling mental health issues has therefore been a central part of this programme's efforts to support reintegration, with a dedicated mental health unit holding individual sessions with children, their mothers, and other family members. It is unclear whether this type of intervention is widely available within current intervention programmes in other countries.

- There is no guarantee that post-disengagement support will negate the psychological impacts of being involved in violent extremism. Corner and Gill's (2020) analysis highlighted that individuals who reported distress post-engagement were more likely (although not statistically significantly) to have access to both material and emotional support after they had disengaged.

DISENGAGEMENT

This section discusses a range of push and pull factors identified in recent literature that could theoretically be leveraged in future interventions, as well as specific barriers to disengagement.

Evidence for the role of a discrete number of push and pull factors in disengagement processes continues to grow (Altier et al., 2020; Fisher-Smith et al., 2020):

- Push factors include unmet expectations; disillusionment with the actions of the group or its members; difficulty adapting to a clandestine lifestyle; inability to cope with the psychological or physiological effects of violence; loss of faith in ideology; and burnout.

- Pull factors include competing loyalties; external relationships; employment and/or educational opportunities; family considerations; financial incentives; and amnesty.

The interaction between push and pull factors is complex and not well understood. Interviews with former and ongoing members of al-Muhajiroun and Jemaah Islamiyah found there was no single push or pull factor or trigger event that drove disengagement, and individuals can experience the same push and pull factors differently. While some will disengage, others choose to remain engaged, although they may reduce their activities or leave temporarily (Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2020).

Understanding how an individual's commitment to a radical group can change over time may help identify which factors an intervention should focus on. Speckhard and Ellenberg's (2020) study of former and imprisoned terrorists found that the ideological commitment of their sample had increased upon joining a group, but often decreased over time as members became disillusioned. Respondents claimed that they became disillusioned for a variety of reasons, including concerns about civilians and other group members being mistreated, and more fundamental concerns such as a lack of food.

Further research to understand why some members of a violent extremist movement become disillusioned, and why others become more entrenched in the movement over time, will be important.

KEY PUSH FACTOR: DISILLUSIONMENT

Increasingly, research is focusing on specific factors such as disillusionment to understand processes of disengagement. In line with Speckhard and Ellenberg's (2020) analysis of violent Islamist extremists, recent studies on former members of extremist organisations from across the ideological spectrum have consistently found that disillusionment is a key push factor. For example:

- Biographies of nine former Provisional IRA members highlighted that 'moral injury' caused by, for example, being exposed to the reality of violence against innocent civilians, led some members to experience a sense of 'moral disillusionment' which may provide 'cognitive openings to disengagement' (Bont, 2020).

- Based on an analysis of 87 autobiographies and interviews with nine formers, Altier et al. (2020) found that individuals who voluntarily disengaged from extremist organisations were eight times more likely to be disillusioned with their day-to-day tasks than a control group of individuals who had disengaged involuntarily.

- Interviews with former members of al-Muhajiroun in the UK and Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia found that a central push factor was 'disillusionment with tactics, leaders, and their own role in the group' (Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2020).

The relationship between disillusionment and disengagement is complex: disillusionment alone does not necessarily lead to disengagement or deradicalisation. Experiences differ with respect to changing levels of commitment to the ideology, members of the group, and the wider organisation.

Kenney and Chernov Hwang (2020) note that while some former members of al-Muhajiroun had left the organisation because they became disillusioned with the ideology, ideological disillusionment was rare amongst former members of Jemaah Islamiyah. Persistent (n=16) and former (n=17) members of both groups were similarly likely to be disillusioned with their group, suggesting that disillusionment was not a predictor of disengagement. Burnout was also a key push factor in the disengagement of some members of al-Muhajiroun, however, this did not preclude some formers from retaining social contacts with members.[3]

Interviews with 21 female former white supremacists conducted by Latif et al. (2020) highlights that:

- Some interviewees had disengaged because they had become disillusioned; most commonly because of disagreements with other members, concerns about the use of violence, or frustration at hierarchies, but some only became disillusioned once they had disengaged.

- Some of those who disengaged never became disillusioned. Reasons for this were because they remained in contact with the broader movement; they retained social relationships with members; they had only left for strategic reasons (e.g. to pursue opportunities unavailable to them while in the movement); or they were alienated from networks outside the movement.

- Those who were disillusioned only disengaged when they could imagine the possibility of doing so, either because they saw it as necessary, for example, to protect their children; because they had formed relationships with outsiders; or when they saw there to be an opportunity to leave, for example, when their partner had left the movement.

The more agile interventions are, the better able they will be to identify what can be relatively short windows of opportunity when individuals begin to feel disillusioned. Interviews with around 50 former members of radical right or left-wing groups suggested that, because 'the motivation for disengaging and leaving might only be short-lived', it is crucial for

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3   Burnout was also identified as a driver of disengagement among former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland interviewed by Ferguson and McAuley (2020).

intervention providers to be flexible and responsive enough to be able to engage individuals quickly and sensitively (Christensen, 2020).

Leveraging sources of disillusionment could be an effective intervention strategy. Reiter et al. (2020) have noted how disillusionment might be 'prompted externally' without any formal intervention, whereby individuals become disillusioned with the way other members of groups or movements behave. However, authors such as Speckhard et al. (2020a; 2020b) have illustrated how narratives of disillusionment from current or former extremists could be used in counter-narrative videos designed to prevent others from becoming involved in violent extremism. While the effectiveness of such videos remains poorly understood (see section on *Online Interventions*), it is an approach worth exploring.

KEY PULL FACTOR: ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Alternative social networks are a crucial pull factor. Interviews with former far-right extremists find that relationships outside of a movement can serve two important purposes (Fisher-Smith et al., 2020). Intervention providers could perform one or both roles to increase the potential for disengagement:

- 'Transgressive relationships' that break the echo chamber of the extremist network by breaking the norm of the movement and undermining its ideology.

- Post-disengagement, they can form 'bridging relationships' that help individuals connect with a new identity or community upon leaving the extremist community.[4]

Fostering alternative social relationships is an important feature able to facilitate disengagement. The absence

> *We also identify a pull factor that separates those who remained from those who left. Respondents who disengaged completely from al-Muhajiroun and Jemaah Islamiyah developed alternative social networks of friends, family members, and mentors who challenged their views and helped them build new identities beyond militancy.*
> *(Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2020)*

of meaningful relationships outside of extremist groups might explain why some individuals remain engaged, even when they have become disillusioned. Interviews with 16 persistent and 17 former members of al-Muhajiroun or Jemaah Islamiyah (Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2020) suggest:

- The presence of alternative social networks was a key difference between former and persistent members of both groups. While some persistent members had formed external relationships, these were more superficial, and so had little impact on their engagement with the group.

- Persistent members had fewer employment or educational opportunities, which may have reduced the perceived benefits of disengagement. This was often because of the specific (often violent or leadership) role they had played in the group or past convictions.

BARRIERS TO DISENGAGEMENT

Processes of disengagement can be facilitated or inhibited by contextual factors. Jensen et al. (2020)

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4   For a discussion of the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship in facilitating disengagement and rehabilitation, see a recent review of 27 studies relating to mentoring in this space (Winterbotham, 2020a). A good example of an approach that foregrounds this relationship is Quebec's Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV). Shaikh et al. (2020) draw on interviews with staff and mentees (n=10) and note that the CPRLV uses a 'psychosocial counselling approach which does not deal with religion at all but rather, to develop a rapport between client and counsellor.' This includes using group therapy and creative art sessions.

compared the life histories of 25 far-right extremists who disengaged with 25 who had not and found:

- Past incarceration and the presence of radical family members or romantic partners were significant barriers to disengagement for all of those who had not disengaged.

- Barriers tended to cluster with other obstacles 'to form the environments in which disengagement either succeeded or failed'. For example, past incarceration tended to be linked with issues such as poor education or unstable employment, substance abuse and mental illness.

- The authors conclude that push and pull factors are often 'viewed in isolation from the personal, social and structural conditions that act as obstacles to successful disengagement' and argue that interventions need to take account of these contextual factors to be successful.

The role an individual holds in a group shapes disengagement processes. Altier et al. (2020) analysed interviews with nine formers and 87 autobiographies and found that individuals in different roles experienced contrasting pressures that might contribute to disengagement such as 'role strain', a mismatch between one's ability and assigned role, or a conflict between one's role in the group and a role outside of the group. Those in leadership or violent roles were less likely to leave terrorism behind, while those in support roles were more likely to disengage. Interventions facilitating disengagement will benefit from having a clear understanding of the role an individual held in an extremist group.

> *In short, effective disengagement strategies are likely to be the ones that reflect the unique contextual settings in which disengagement occurs.*
>
> *(Jensen et al., 2020)*

THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF CVE INTERVENTIONS

Social-ecological factors relevant to interpreting radicalisation include the immediate environment that an individual lives in, and the relationships they have with family members, peers and community members, as well as broader societal and cultural contexts (Ellis et al., 2020b). This section explores how research on social ecology can inform secondary and tertiary interventions.[5]

SECONDARY INTERVENTIONS: THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF PREVENTION

KEY POINTS

- The social ecology in which an individual lives can be both a risk factor and a protective factor.

- Multi-disciplinary interventions that target a range of social-ecological factors are increasingly being used to support those at risk of being radicalised and have produced some promising early results.

- Focusing interventions on the immediate social context in which an at-risk individual lives – for example, by building community resilience or fostering dialogue between different communities – is a potentially effective way of preventing radicalisation.

- Social-ecological interventions that build community resilience can potentially address some of the challenges faced by secondary intervention providers. Fostering preventative skills within peer networks may help to reach individuals that the authorities or other providers are unable to reach.

- Communities are willing to engage with preventative interventions but need support to do so.

Secondary interventions must take account of social-ecological factors. Someone's social-ecological context, which is typically understood to be the relationship between the individual and their environment, can be a protective and a risk factor. Three quantitative studies have outlined how contextual factors can influence radicalisation:[6]

- Social contexts 'regulate what people consider as appropriate means to assert collective significance' (Jasko et al., 2020). Research comparing attitudes within more or less radical contexts in different countries, such as comparing former terrorists and non-terrorists in Sri Lanka, or members of moderate, Islamist and Jihadist groups in Indonesia, highlights the importance of the social context, finding that 'the immediate social network may exert a stronger influence over potential recruits than possible messaging from the outside'.

- Support for violent extremism relates to peer attitudes and the diversity of an individual's social network. A survey of young men (n=340) found that those who perceived their peers to be more supportive of violent extremism were more likely to hold violent extremist beliefs. However, those in more diverse social networks were less likely to hold such beliefs, even when they perceived

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5   For more discussion of the ecology of radicalisation, see Dawson (2017) and Bouhana (2019).
6   Alongside these empirical studies, a more theoretical study from Kruglanski and Bertelsen (2020) has recently outlined a Person-Situation model of radicalisation. This proposes that vulnerability to radicalisation is shaped by the needs and life projects of the individual and 'the socio-political social, cultural, and societal environment in which the persons exist'. They argue that this model calls for a shift away from individual approaches to counter-radicalisation towards a whole society approach that addresses situational factors facilitating radicalisation.

that their peers supported violent extremism (Kaczkowski et al., 2020).

- Living in a 'safe and secure sociocultural context' is a key protective factor against radicalisation (Ozer and Bertelsen, 2019). To test the assumptions of the Life Psychology Model underpinning the Aarhus model, research with young people in the USA (n=322) and Denmark (n=364) supported the notion that 'contextual adversity and instability, as well as lack of support and abuse, have been associated with later development of extremist attitudes' (Ozer and Bertelsen, 2020). Those lacking 'life skills', such as vocational skills required for employment, were more likely to consider their contexts to be unstable and were seen to be more at risk.

Based on the research by Ozer and Bertelsen (2019; 2020), a recent review by RUSI argued that 'equipping individuals at risk of radicalisation with necessary life skills' was a 'potentially effective' approach (Winterbotham, 2020a). However, this review notes that because Ozer and Bertelsen's analysis is based on a survey of a non-radical population, the applicability of their findings to a programme focused on those at risk of radicalisation remains unclear.

Tools are being developed to understand what social-ecological sources of strength might prevent radicalisation. Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) is a measure developed through interviews and surveys with Australian and Canadian young people. It is rooted in a social-ecological view of resilience, rather than a traditional individual view that focuses on vulnerabilities (Grossman et al., 2020). BRAVE is a 14-item measure consisting of five factors:

- Cultural Identity and Connectedness

- Bridging Capital

- Linking Capital

- Violence-Related Behaviours

- Violence-Related Beliefs

> *Social-ecological resilience is 'the ability to resist and challenge the social legitimation of violent extremist propaganda, recruitment and ideology as a response to social and political grievances, based on access to and capacity to navigate and mobilize socio-cultural resources for coping and thriving under adversity'*
>
> *(Grossman et al., 2020)*

The researchers who developed BRAVE conclude that their research has implications for primary and secondary interventions by focusing attention on under-utilised social-ecological factors that might prevent radicalisation, or that those on a radicalisation trajectory might struggle to access without support or intervention.

Social-ecological approaches are being trialled in the secondary prevention space. Hussain et al. (2019) have suggested that mediated dialogue between different extremist milieus could be an effective secondary intervention:

- Six members of extreme-right and Islamist milieus (none of whom had engaged in *violent* extremism) participated in facilitated discussions voluntarily. The aim of these sessions was not to change their attitudes or behaviours, but to facilitate discussion and to develop new relationships.

> *These desires for, and commitments to, openness, movement and critical enquiry all speak to the potential for such interventions to prevent the solidifying of extremist attitudes/ behaviour and thus their usefulness among the tools of CVE and youth work practice.*
>
> *(Hussain et al., 2019)*

- Participants explored similarities between each other, and the researchers noted that this experience 'prompted a desire to be involved in more dialogue'.

Social-ecological interventions may also have several practical benefits that could address some of the challenges faced by current secondary interventions. Kaczkowski et al. (2020) argue that 'social-ecological P/CVE initiatives' that 'foster prevention skills and resources within peer networks' through peer mediation may help to reach individuals that the authorities or other providers are unable to reach. For an example of this type of social-ecological intervention in education settings, see *Box 4*.

Training friends or family members to recognise potentially problematic issues in others could be effective. A US-based survey (n=1,151) found that individuals were willing to intervene when concerned about a friend or family member's potential radicalisation, but that their two most preferred forms of intervention would be to ask them what they are thinking and to give them advice (Williams et al., 2020). The researchers argue that enabling direct peer mediation would be useful as there was still some scepticism about the effectiveness of third-party counsellors in their sample.[7]

Practitioners interviewed for recent studies – including those in the UK – have spoken about the importance of taking a social-ecological approach to tackling radicalisation. Key insights include:

- Partnering with key actors in communities and establishing non-violent trustworthy relationships are considered to have a positive impact on efforts to prevent radicalisation (Puigvert et al., 2020). Practitioners in Spain, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands take the view that these kinds

> *[An end-user of an intervention] observed that real friends can be lifesavers, truly acting as a protective barrier. Prevention campaigns need to be oriented towards this and addressed the building of a 'big network of prevention'—in this end-user's own words, a network in which people can act as upstanding agent*
>
> *(Puigvert et al., 2020)*

of social-ecological processes are important in preventative work.

- Tackling contextual issues such as the features of the neighbourhood where an individual lives, or being in an abusive relationship, are increasingly being addressed in what has been described as a 'contextual safeguarding' approach (Evans, 2020). Practitioners from Connect Futures, a UK-based organisation that delivers interventions in schools, use this approach. They argue that 'instead of trying to support individuals to make 'smarter choices', it is important to focus on addressing contextual issues which can negatively impact on such decision-making.

Research from North America has outlined how interventions targeting multiple levels of social ecology can be effective (Ellis et al., 2020b).[8] While this study is anecdotal, drawing on two case studies of individuals, it illustrates how social-ecological approaches can be built into interventions, and supports the assumptions underpinning multi-disciplinary early intervention programmes:

- In one case, a young convert was referred to a community organisation by the FBI due to activity

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7   For a discussion of an international example of this type of approach, see a recent paper on a Turkish intervention that reported some success in involving families in efforts to prevent terrorist recruitment (Yayla, 2020). This study draws on a large sample of interviews and family visits with 479 different families and potential recruits.
8   For more discussion of North American approaches, see Shaikh et al. (2020) and Savoia et al. (2020). The latter study is particularly useful as it discusses the development and evaluation of a pilot intervention in Boston.

BOX 4

The Tolerance Project: Leveraging social networks in a secondary intervention

Background

The Tolerance Project is an educational initiative delivered in Swedish schools that seeks to 'address the whole social structure' around young people (Skiple, 2020). It is based around the metaphor of a 'grape cluster'. At the centre of the cluster is a group of intolerant youth, with those potentially susceptible to being influenced by them towards the outside of the cluster, and both groups 'held together by a stem of social unrest'. The programme is advertised to all 14- and 15-year-olds in participating schools. Developers select participants from within the grape cluster and bring them together with students with more pro-social attitudes who form an alternative reference group.

Approach

The project is underpinned by the assumption that it is more effective to focus on the social context in which individuals who hold intolerant views are rooted, rather than targeting the individual. The programme draws on socialisation theory, which proposes that attitudes are influenced by parents and/or other people with whom an individual has emotional ties in the early stages of life (primary socialisation), and by professional socialisation agents such as teachers, as well as peers (secondary socialisation). Each group plays a key role in challenging intolerant attitudes:

- *Parents are expected to read and discuss assignments with their children. Parents are also encouraged to participate in more direct ways, such as by writing letters to students.*

- *Teachers are expected to become 'good adult role models' during sessions. To support this work, teachers are trained about counter-extremism and local far-right activity through a course delivered by Gothenburg University.*

- *Peers play a key role in socialising those within the grape cluster through dialogue that is facilitated between 'at risk' and 'well-socialized' youth.*

Impact

While the project has not been formally evaluated, a smaller-scale study conducted by Skiple (2020) found that it had 'seemed to work well for those young people who were not perceived to be at risk of radicalization, by increasing their confidence and knowledge about the Holocaust, as well as improving their overall democratic preparedness.' The project was also perceived to have had a positive impact on some of the more at-risk young people. However, several challenges were identified around recruiting those with the most extreme views, the responsibility placed on young people who were asked to socialise others, and the issue of some parents holding extreme views.

that suggested they were planning an attack. Vulnerabilities were identified at different levels of analysis, namely the microsystem (e.g. depression, anger, trauma); mesosystem (e.g. family conflict, family rejection of their faith); exosystem (e.g. bullying, parental illness) and macrosystem (e.g. availability of extremist content online).

- The intervention providers 'determined that there were several opportunities for intervention across the youth's social ecology' and a multi-disciplinary support plan was put in place to address issues such as his depression and lack of social skills, and family issues including a lack of adequate medical care for one of their parents. After one year, the intervention providers reported that this individual had 'significantly improved' based on reduced levels of depression, improved performance at school, and the establishment of new and healthy friendships.

TERTIARY INTERVENTIONS: THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF DESISTANCE AND DISENGAGEMENT

KEY POINTS

- Successful disengagement and reintegration rests on a holistic approach to intervention that addresses the psychological, educational, and emotional needs of the individual, as well as fostering supportive social-ecological conditions, including family and community support.

- The specific prison contexts and cultures in which tertiary interventions are delivered can place practical constraints on reintegration efforts, particularly when there are time and staff shortages.

- There are several challenges when working with parolees upon their release, including building trust between providers, recipients, and families; providing adequate training and support for families; and, in some cases, addressing the

potentially negative influence of families and peers on parolees.

- Expertise from a variety of fields, such as research on refugees and war-impacted communities, could be used to inform interventions for re-integrating returnees from Syria and Iraq. Given the sensitivities around this issue, it will be important to sensitively communicate the aims of such programmes. Without the buy-in of the local community, re-integration efforts seem more likely to fail.

Social-ecological factors are important in the success of tertiary interventions. Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) working with terrorist parolees as part of Australia's Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) disengagement programme have argued that effective family engagement is crucial to a range of key intervention outcomes (Cherney, 2021). Not only do CCOs see families as key for preventing parolees from engaging in anti-social behaviour, but for three parolees interviewed as part of the study, they had secured employment through members of their extended family.

> *The transition of prisoners into the community requires other social institutions to play a key role. That is, third parties such as families offer social (pro-social/ non-extremist networks) and economic (source of work) support, as well as resources (e.g. accommodation and transport) that can influence the process of reintegration.*
>
> *(Cherney, 2021)*

Cherney's (2021) study also identified several barriers that intervention providers need to consider:

- Overcoming trust issues is key. Families may distrust the authorities and may perceive that CCOs are simply interested in monitoring parolees, rather than rehabilitating them.

- Families need support. Families may find it difficult to adjust to the return of a family member after incarceration, with three parolees noting that 'their wives, and other family members and relatives with whom they were residing, experienced anxiety about their return to the family home and were uncertain about how best to engage them and help in their reintegration'.

- Families are not always positive influences. In some cases, families can be a negative influence on parolees, particularly when family members were the source of the parolee's radicalisation.

The immediate context in which tertiary interventions are delivered can both contribute to and inhibit their success. Prison-based interventions are impacted by specific prison cultures and settings, with different contexts creating differing opportunities and constraints for this work:

- The custodial environment can pose a challenge when trying to establish therapeutic relationships between providers and recipients (Cherney, 2020). Research on PRISM in Australia found that because high-risk terrorist inmates are subject to some of the strictest controls, there are limits on who they can associate with, and for how long. Because they spend little time outside of cells, there is little time for staff to meet and build relationships with them.

- Staff shortages and inadequate staff training hindered attempts to tackle extremism in prisons during the Troubles in Northern Ireland (Butler,

2020). Such issues may have similarly negative impacts on present-day efforts, although this has not been explored empirically.[9]

- Prisoner subcultures, prisoners' support for Canadian multiculturalism, and correction officers' efforts to identify and isolate extremists have been perceived to inhibit prison radicalisation in Canada according to interviews with prisoners (n=587) and correction officers (n=131) (Schultz et al., 2020).

Researchers and practitioners have argued for multi-dimensional social-ecological approaches to rehabilitating and re-integrating returnees from the Islamic State.[10] For example, in a Kosovan study (Ruf and Jansen, 2019), attempts to reintegrate and rehabilitate female and child returnees involved coordination between a range of agencies, such as housing and welfare services and education services.

While there has been limited research into the effectiveness of this type of intervention, a recent rapid evidence review of literature from related fields demonstrates how this type of multi-disciplinary intervention can be informed by empirical academic research from comparable areas (see *Box 5*).

To increase the likelihood that this type of post-conflict re-integration programme is effective, communities require the resources to support returnees and must be willing to do so. This support will not always be available. An international survey of 31 practitioners found only 48.4 per cent agreed that they would receive community support for these efforts (Strong Cities Network, 2020).[11]

Sensitively communicating the aims of re-integration programmes to communities is important.[12] Because

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9   For a more detailed discussion of the management of TACT offenders, see Copeland and Marsden (2020a).

10   A Radicalisation Awareness Network guide that draws on the insights of practitioners discusses how prioritising resocialisation is crucial if a returnee is to be successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated. It also notes that resocialisation is particularly important for returnees (RAN, 2017b).

11   While a slightly different issue, this mirrors a systematic review of 18 studies relating to community perceptions of former combatants in Nigeria conducted by Ike et al. (2020). Nine studies identified scepticism towards the sustainability of monetising rehabilitation and reintegration programmes; seven identified resistance towards what were seen as favourable incentives being offered to former combatants; 12 identified a lack of confidence in the genuine repentance of former combatants; and 11 identified a lack of confidence in the government's programme.

12   Although a recent Home Office-funded survey (ICM, 2019) reported that 66% of its sample were supportive of rehabilitation efforts delivered through the Desistance and Disengagement programme.

BOX 5

A multi-disciplinary framework for rehabilitating and re-integrating child returnees from the Islamic State

Weine et al. (2020) conducted a rapid review of 31 studies drawn from work on refugee children, war-impacted children, child criminal gang members, child victims of maltreatment, and child victims of sex trafficking to develop the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Intervention Framework (RRIF).

This framework incorporates five different levels of support (individual, family, educational, community and society), and outlines five primary goals relating to each area of work:

1. *Promoting individual mental health and wellbeing – Provide health services to help returnees recover from developmental, mental, and physical injuries.*

2. *Promoting family support – Strengthen families and mitigate family conflict through family education, support, and counselling.*

3. *Promoting educational success – Promote educational involvement and success with specialised educational programmes, integrated psychosocial care, and bullying prevention.*

4. *Promoting community support – Strengthen community resilience and mitigate stigma and discrimination.*

5. *Improving structural conditions and public safety – Improve the conditions for children and mothers (e.g. at home or work), assess security threats, and prevent future involvement in extremism and terrorism.*

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programmes to support returning foreign fighters are controversial, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (2017b) has suggested that local communication strategies are needed to achieve buy-in from communities. In a recent UK-based survey (n=597), Clubb et al. (2019) illustrated how the language used to communicate the aims of such interventions can influence public attitudes:

- Respondents were presented with one of four tailored newspaper stories about a government intervention targeting IS foreign fighters. In each story, the name of the intervention varied, referring either to a Disengagement and Desistance Programme or a De-Radicalisation Programme. The focus of the intervention was also manipulated

in relation to whether ideological change was a key focus of the intervention or not.

- Using the language of deradicalisation and focusing on ideological change slightly increased support for reintegration when compared to a programme using the terms disengagement and desistance. However, the name 'De-Radicalisation' decreased perceived effectiveness.

There appears to be some public willingness to support female and child returnees from Syria and Iraq, although more research is needed.[13] In a survey, 52% of Dutch Muslim women (n=208) believed female returnees deserved a second chance, while 16% did not (Kanhai and Abbas, 2020); 62% felt that getting in touch with female returnees was valuable, and 70%

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13   For a case study of how Kosovo repatriated 110 female and child returnees, see Ruf and Jansen (2019).

> *Despite many women being open to reintegration on a personal level, from the wider Muslim community's point of view, they would not communicate with female returnees if engagement was not accepted.*
>
> *(Kanhai and Abbas, 2020)*

thought it important; while 46% intended to interact with these women, but only if the wider community accepted them.

Community members may be willing to engage female returnees but need support. Interviews in Australia (n=16) suggested people were 'open but wary' to engaging with female returnees, but reported that not all people would be willing to do so (Grossman and Barolsky, 2019). Respondents felt that communities could play an important role in offering informal social support, and to do so would need:

- Training on how to engage

- Education on some of the key issues relating to returnees

- More information about the local support available (such as an information desk or database of local organisations)

- Ability to draw on skilled practitioners working in local communities

- Funding for community services.

This broader political and societal context might also negatively impact intervention practice. Community corrections officers supporting high-risk terrorist offenders in Australia argued that high levels of public interest in terrorism placed them under a great deal of pressure, which encouraged them to adopt an overly risk-averse approach that was not always helpful (Cherney, 2021).

- Some respondents argued that the pressure that parolees experience might reduce their chances of successfully reintegrating upon their release. Not only did they believe that public debates make it harder to engage these offenders at the outset (as offenders are wary of attempts to engage them), they also felt 'the level of scrutiny surrounding radicalised offenders on parole can potentially set them up for failure', as it becomes impossible for parolees to move on.

- Offenders interviewed as part of the same study also discussed how they felt as though their treatment was primarily shaped by 'politics', particularly when tighter restrictions had been introduced. As the author of this study notes, tighter restrictions may be introduced for a raft of non-political reasons, however, if an intervention is perceived to be inherently unfair, engaging prisoners in intervention work, and facilitating their reintegration will likely be much harder.

COMMUNITY REPORTING

KEY POINTS

- Individuals are willing to report friends or family members under the right circumstances.

- Barriers to reporting include trust in the authorities and knowledge of reporting mechanisms.

- Reporting is a phased process; individuals typically attempt to intervene personally before reporting an individual to the authorities.

- Policymakers and practitioners can help to overcome barriers to reporting through education or communication campaigns.

- More attention should be paid to how best to facilitate informal interventions within social networks.

This section builds on the previous discussion of social ecology to discuss how community members might directly support efforts to prevent radicalisation, as well as the potential barriers to this work.

Local communities are considered crucial allies in efforts to prevent radicalisation, but research into the effectiveness of community partnerships is lacking.[14] A recent systematic review of studies published between January 2002 and December 2018 examined 'whether or not police programmes that seek to promote community connectedness are effective in reducing violent extremist behaviours, attitudes and beliefs', but was only able to identify one robust study published within this period (Mazerolle et al., 2020). This study examined the community-led, US-based World Organisation for Resource Development Education (WORDE) intervention that was built around three interlocking workstreams:

- A community education component that covered topics such as family support, youth engagement, and conflict resolution.

- An agency networks element, which sought to develop a multi-agency referral network.

- An organised volunteerism and multicultural activities aspect, in which community members were given the opportunity to participate in a variety of community projects.

An evaluation of WORDE reported positive outcomes along behavioural (e.g. levels of coping skills), attitudinal (e.g. attitudes towards different religions or ethnicities), and knowledge (e.g. knowledge of other cultures) measures. However, the evaluation was limited to self-reported survey data (n=191) and did not explore community perceptions or experiences of police engagement, which means its overall impact is unclear.

There is growing evidence that local communities are willing to report individuals to the authorities under the right circumstances. Recent research in the UK and the United States has found:

- Individuals will likely try to intervene themselves before reporting a friend or family member. Based on interviews in the UK (n=66), Thomas et al. (2020) identify three stages: pre-reporting; reporting; and post-reporting. In the pre-reporting stage, respondents spoke about being willing to intervene themselves before formally reporting an individual. This mirrors research from the US, which found survey respondents (n=1,151) expressed a preference for 'direct engagement' with a friend or family member (i.e. the two most-preferred intervention types selected in their

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14   For a discussion of some of the challenges relating to community perceptions of CVE interventions, see a recent CREST report on community experiences of the counter-terrorism system (Lewis and Marsden, 2020).

survey were that they would ask them what they were thinking or give them advice) over forms of intervention that would involve a third-party (Williams et al., 2020).

- There is a willingness to formally report individuals to the authorities when it is seen to be in the individual's best interests, and/or when there is perceived to be an imminent risk. This finding is consistent in both the UK (Thomas et al., 2020) and the US (Williams et al., 2020).

- There is a lack of clarity about how to report. Studies in the UK and USA have found that people often don't know how to report (Thomas et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020), with Thomas et al. (2020) arguing that there is a need for 'accessible public information around pathways towards radicalisation and possible "warning signs", as well as on how to seek help'.

- People are motivated to report out of a duty of care and prefer some reporting mechanisms over others. Thomas et al. (2020) found that their respondents would prefer to report face-to-face to local bodies and held some antipathy towards national hotlines and/or agencies.

- There are barriers to reporting, including a concern about what will happen to the reporter and/or the person being reported and a lack of trust in the authorities (Thomas et al., 2020). There are also more subtle barriers, with Williams et al. (2020) finding that individuals 'tend to be less likely to recognize illegal, potentially-injurious activities of friends with whom they closely identify'. As noted earlier, individuals may be willing to report friends and family members under the right circumstances, but a lack of training or knowledge about how to do so can be barriers.

- Reporters need to feel supported throughout the reporting process, including in the post-reporting stage. Information-sharing and feedback post-

reporting is thought to be especially important (Thomas et al., 2020).

Emerging research suggests that encouraging community reporting will be helped by ensuring those who report and those who are reported are treated in a procedurally just way. This involves giving them a voice by enabling them to share their experiences; exhibiting neutrality; treating them with dignity and respect; and demonstrating trustworthiness by showing care for their wellbeing.[15]

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15   For a discussion of the importance of procedural justice within CVE, see Lewis and Marsden (2020).

ONLINE INTERVENTIONS AND COUNTER-MESSAGING

KEY POINTS

- Intervention providers are increasingly engaging with individuals online, but often in an ad hoc or uncoordinated manner. More formal training on how to conduct P/CVE work online will be important as more work takes place online.

- Recent evaluations of online interventions and counter-messaging campaigns have reported positive results. However, the effectiveness of these interventions remains poorly understood as many evaluations focus on assessing an intervention's reach, but not its impact. More research is needed to develop robust methodologies for evaluating the offline impact of these interventions.

- Counter-messaging campaigns are more effective at influencing some audiences than others. A recent systematic review suggested that counter-narratives might be effective at tackling the early stages of radicalisation, but less able to challenge the views of those who support violence.

- The content of counter-messages and the type of person who delivers them seems to influence their impact. It is crucial that the content of messages resonates with the target audience, and that the messenger is seen as credible. Participatory methods, which involve target groups in the development and delivery of messages, could be useful in enhancing credibility and resonance.

- Online platforms such as Facebook provide a potential platform for engaging individuals at risk of radicalisation, but more research is needed to understand the offline impact of these interactions.

- There is a need to understand the potential for interventions on alternative platforms that are used to share extremist content such as Gab, and the specific challenges that such interventions might face.

This section explores recent research that has examined the use of social media platforms to deliver interventions and the potential efficacy of online counter-narrative campaigns. It also considers research on the impact of offline P/CVE communications campaigns, which might inform online work.

ONLINE INTERVENTIONS

The online space provides increased opportunities for extremist actors – particularly far-right actors – to reach wider audiences. This is reflected in a recent report from the European Union-funded DARE project, which analysed 596 far-right and Islamist extremist Twitter accounts from Belgium, France, Germany, the UK, Greece, the Netherlands and Norway and concluded that it seems easy for bystanders 'to engage in conversations on Twitter, find material to support further engagement in political matters, and possibly join the movements of extremism and populist right-wing radicalism' (Nilsen et al., 2020).

CVE practitioners are increasingly attempting to use online tools, primarily for disrupting the early stages of radicalisation. Perceived benefits of online interventions include (Davey et al., 2019):

- They enable intervention providers to reach out more easily to those at risk of radicalisation.

- They provide a degree of distance or anonymity that can reduce the perceived risks for both providers and those that they are engaging with.

- They reduce the immediate financial costs of intervention delivery.

BOX 6

Digital youth work: Recommendations from the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)

Background

In 2020, the European Union's Radicalisation Awareness Network published a paper on 'How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context' (Jansen et al., 2020). Based on discussions between different expert working groups, this paper outlines key principles for online interventions, such as defining and identifying target groups; selecting appropriate online platforms for reaching them; producing content that is relevant to the target group and appropriate for the platform being used; developing the necessary skills and expertise; and producing guidelines for delivering this work that are sensitive to ethical, legal, and safety considerations. It also cites examples of best practice:

Streetwork@online (Germany): Engaging young people through social media

This online intervention aims to prevent young people aged 16–27 from being radicalised. Providers conduct 'online streetwork' through platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Providers will first attempt to engage individuals in conversation by, for example, commenting on public posts in group chats, with the aim of continuing the conversation in a private online chat and ultimately, if needed, connecting an individual to offline support. To identify potential target groups, providers monitor both individual social media profiles, as well as groups in which extremist content is shared.

Web Walkers (France): Establishing and training local networks of digital youth workers

First established in 2016, this online intervention expanded to include P/CVE work in 2019. It is based on establishing facilitated local networks of professionals who deliver online interventions to young people. Members of local networks are provided with online and offline training sessions to develop their online skills and subject knowledge. And, through online and offline meetings and workshops with other members of their local network, these youth workers can share best practice, get assistance from their peers, and raise any concerns they have.

Intervention providers will need support and training if they are to deliver online interventions effectively. Given the sometimes ad hoc and uncoordinated approach taken by some CVE practitioners, toolkits, and resources to support practitioners have been recommended (see *Box 6*).

There is growing evidence that it is possible to engage people, and in some cases divert individuals away from extremist content, using online methods and social networking sites, however, the overall impact of these initiatives is difficult to assess. Pilot studies of Facebook-based interventions have reported promising results while still highlighting the limitations of online tools currently available:

An intervention delivered by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) managed to engage 76 individuals in a 'sustained [Facebook] conversation' (Davey et al., 2018) having initially contacted 569 people identified

as being at risk of radicalisation through Facebook Messenger.[16] Eight of these individuals indicated that this conversation had a positive impact, for example, by expressing a desire to take the conversation offline, or suggesting that it had changed their attitudes or beliefs, or their online behaviours in a positive way. This study reported several factors that were important in delivering online interventions including:

- The benefits of providers responding immediately when receiving a message

- The importance of adopting a casual and mediative tone in messages

- The importance of manually reviewing any individuals identified as being at risk of radicalisation through automated tools to remove false positives, and to flag higher-risk individuals who need to be immediately referred to the authorities.[17]

A recent evaluation of the Facebook Redirect Project (Moonshot, 2020a) concluded that the pilot, delivered in the United States and Australia, had been 'broadly successful'. The project involved showing people who searched for a predetermined set of keywords a 'safety module' that explained that these keywords 'may be associated with dangerous groups and individuals' and that 'Facebook works with organizations that help prevent the spread of hate and violent extremism.' There was a 'Learn More' option which directed the user to an intervention provider in their country. During the pilot, 'thousands' clicked on 'Learn More' and 25 people began a conversation with an intervention provider, and ultimately received support from them.

While existing online interventions use automated tools for identifying and/or engaging those at risk of being radicalised, emerging technology could be better utilised. There is clear scope for intervention providers to engage with and learn from research centres that have developed their own automated tools for identifying extremist content or hate speech online (such as Cardiff University's HateLab).

While this research is exploratory, Schroeter (2020) has outlined how artificial intelligence, including machine learning and natural language processing tools, could be utilised to moderate extremist content online and to promote counter-narrative material in future. Similarly, Baele et al. (2021) argue that AI tools similar to those developed by McGuffie and Newhouse (2020) could be adapted for P/CVE. While McGuffie and Newhouse's tool was developed as something of a warning, as it illustrated how AI could be used to recreate extremist texts, Baele et al. argue that this technology could be used to 'regularly post content that looks genuine (using the right language, imagery, etc.) yet is meaningless' on message boards hosting extremist content. They argue that this would 'dilute the message of these boards and make their threads uninteresting, thereby reducing their attractiveness and sense of community'.

Attempts to deliver interventions through alternative online platforms will face challenges. There is a gap in current interventions as most focus on mainstream social networks rather than alternative social media platforms such as Gab (Davey et al., 2019). However, Baele et al's (2021) recent research into usage patterns on the 'chans' (anonymous image-board forums such as 4Chan which have been increasingly linked to extremist sentiment) has clear implications for future interventions on such sites:

- Interventions on these sites need to be targeted towards the users of specific message boards. The authors identified three tiers of message boards

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16   This study builds on an evaluation of an earlier pilot study published in 2015 (Frenett and Dow, 2015) that reported similar results and identified similar learnings around message tone and content. The 2018 evaluation highlights how response rates and numbers of sustained conversations varied across demographics. For example, men were more likely to respond than women, and individuals engaging with Islamist extremism online were more likely to respond, and have sustained conversations, than those engaging with far-right content.

17   The limitations of using automated tools or artificial intelligence to identify extremist content online has been discussed widely, although recent research has discussed novel approaches (e.g. Araque and Iglesias, 2020).

across these sites, ranging from boards with high levels of posting traffic but less extreme content (Tier 1) through to boards with very little traffic but the most extreme content (Tier 3). Intervention providers must decide whether an intervention is to focus on the broadest population (Tier 1), those who are at increased risk of engaging with extremist ideas (Tier 2), or those already engaged with the most extreme content (Tier 3) and tailor their approach accordingly.

- Although the evidence base is limited, counter-narrative campaigns are currently considered likely to be ineffective in alternative online platforms. Users of these forums are highly suspicious of those who do not use the specific language or 'unwritten interaction codes' of the group and are concerned about being surveilled. They have also shown themselves to be 'capable of determining that they are under surveillance', for example by noting 'how a particular IP address is only posting suspicious messages during office hours'.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-MESSAGING

Counter-narrative campaigns have been shown to be effective in reaching a large number of internet users, but their true impact is unclear. Several studies have evaluated the reach of such campaigns.

A series of 16 campaigns run over a month on Facebook that were 'hyper-targeted' at individuals considered vulnerable to radicalisation received 5,110 post reactions, page likes, comments, and shares (Speckhard et al., 2020b).[18]

An earlier US pilot of Moonshot's Redirect Method, which used Google AdWords to identify people searching for extremist content on Google, and presented them with an advertisement linking to

counternarrative videos, had significant reach (Helmus and Klein, 2018):

- Counter-narratives were advertised to users in over half of relevant searches. Advertisements targeting violent jihadist and far-right keywords appeared in 216,221 searches. This equated to 55.29% of all searches for keywords, below the target of 75%.

- The campaign was more effective at reaching individuals searching for jihadist content. The far-right counter-narrative advertisement appeared 179,925 times, and the jihadist advertisement appeared 36,296 times. However, the jihadist counter-narrative appeared in 91.13% of relevant searches, while the far-right counter-narrative only appeared in 51.23%.

- Engagement with the counter-narrative videos was limited but in line with other Google advertising campaigns. Overall, 2.39% of individuals who saw an advertisement clicked on it, with this figure slightly higher for the violent jihadist (3.19%) than the far-right campaign (2.22%). This is compared to the average for a Google ad campaign of 3.17%.

Figures relating to reach have been described as 'vanity metrics' (Jones, 2020) and say little about the effectiveness of campaigns, which can be extremely challenging to interpret. A recent systematic review of both online and offline campaigns identified only 15 high-quality papers published between 2000 and 2018 (Carthy et al., 2020). The study concluded that 'the targeted counter-narrative approach shows promise', however the positive effects that they reported were limited. Based on analysing all outcomes reported across the 15 papers, the authors found:

- Some of the interventions had been effective at targeting risk factors that might contribute to radicalisation, such as in-group favouritism or out-group hostility, but were less effective at tackling others, such as implicit bias.

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18   This study is part of a larger project that has interviewed over 240 IS and al Shabaab returnees, defectors, and imprisoned members, and which has produced 180 counter-narrative films featuring members and families.

- There was limited but 'discouraging evidence' on interventions' effectiveness at reducing the intent to act violently. This suggests that counter-narratives might be effective at tackling the early stages of radicalisation, but less able to challenge the views of those who support violence.

The type of counter-messages and the type of person who delivers them influence their impact. As described above, some counter-narratives seem to be effective at reducing support for IS, however, five of the nine counter-narratives tested on 886 American Muslims backfired when shown to those considered at risk of radicalisation, including religious messages delivered by an Imam, government or IS defector (Bélanger et al., 2020).[19] Research is beginning to look at the role of fully independent, informal actors in delivering online interventions (Lee, 2020) and the role of humour and satire in countering terrorist narratives (Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020), but this research is in its infancy.

Participatory methods may have promise in aiding the development of communications campaigns and supporting those at risk of radicalisation. Rather than developing narratives seeking to challenge terrorist propaganda, exploratory participatory interventions have set out to address the concerns of individuals 'at risk' of radicalisation by supporting intervention mentors and mentees to develop media content (Freear and Glazzard, 2020). While the effectiveness of this approach is unclear, focus groups with participants suggest that the process of creating the content was empowering for those involved, and was more impactful than the content itself.

> *'Rather than seeking to impose a desired message or worldview, the intervention's participative approach sought to provide skills and opportunities for mentees – as well as challenge and guidance – to support them to voice what mattered to them.'*
> *(Freear and Glazzard, 2020)*

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19   This at-risk group was defined by those respondents who had a 'need for cognitive closure' on the basis that black-and-white thinking is commonly associated with extremist attitudes and risk of radicalisation.

INTERVENTION PRACTICE: LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

This section discusses key lessons identified from international case studies of intervention practice. While this discussion draws solely on empirical studies, many of these studies are descriptive and say little about effectiveness. Where possible, the implications for policy and practice are described.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Effective risk assessment is crucial to the success of secondary and tertiary interventions. Researchers have analysed different risk assessment tools, yet little is known about how these tools are used in practice.[20] However, recent research from France and the UK has provided important insights.

An overly suspicious approach to risk assessment may be counterproductive. Staff working in Radicalisation Assessment Units (RAU) in French prisons have been found to adopt a somewhat risk-averse approach to assessing risk and to be overly suspicious of prisoners (Chantraine and Scheer, 2020). Interviews with staff and prisoners (n=90) describe how this mindset potentially undermines assessments:

- An overly alarmist approach to risk assessment is self-fulfilling. Adopting an overly suspicious or biased attitude meant that, according to the authors, staff 'only see that the person presenting themselves as radicalized is indeed radicalized and the one who behaves well is a dissimulator'.

- Prisoners adapt their behaviour in response to suspicious attitudes from staff. Once prisoners

> *We share tips. About homosexuality, for example, we have set replies. We share them because they treat everyone the same way.*
>
> *(Prisoner interviewed by Chantraine and Scheer, 2020)*

came to recognise those behaviours that were likely to be interpreted as indicators of radicalisation by prison staff, they shared tips about how to behave to avoid suspicion. [21]

Practitioners believe current risk assessment processes are subjective. Two recent studies have illustrated how Channel panels interpret risk in subjective ways, and that beliefs about the appropriate threshold for intervention can vary across panels (Pettinger, 2020b; Thornton and Bouhana, 2019).[22]

Training in risk assessment is crucial and should be tailored to the different professional backgrounds of assessors and the contexts in which they work. A survey of 41 professionals with experience of carrying out risk or threat assessments (Salman and Gill, 2020) found:

- Professional training was considered a requirement for risk assessment, but there were different opinions on what type of training was needed. Training in specific risk assessment tools, general principles of threat and risk assessment, and

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20   For a discussion of risk assessment tools, see a recent CREST report from Copeland and Marsden (2020b).

21   Related to this is the issue of false compliance with disengagement programmes, which has become a topic of discussion in the UK. There has been no empirical research into the prevalence of this issue, nor how to identify false compliance. Thus, while a recent report from ICSR (Basra and Neumann, 2020) noted that ''False compliance' seems to have become more widespread', it also noted that the 'true extent is unknown.'

22   The subjectivity of risk assessment is also discussed by Prevent police officers interviewed by Dresser in the UK (2019), and community police officers interviewed by van de Weert and Eijkman (2020) in the Netherlands.

psychology or mental health were the most popular types of training identified.

- Training in specific tools and general principles of risk assessment is already standard practice, training in psychology or mental health is not. By definition, forensic psychologists who use risk assessment tools will have had this training, those from other professional backgrounds may not. Consequently, training needs vary across different assessors and professional contexts.

- A majority of respondents (n=34) felt that assessors should have some professional experience, but there was no consensus on how much, or which professions were best suited to conducting risk assessments. There was also a lack of agreement over how many people should be involved in assessing individual cases, or whether assessments needed to be done in person or remotely.

> *Understanding the different contexts in which terrorism risk assessment takes place, and the background of assessors in those contexts, could therefore bear important implications for training practices and how these are tailored to different contexts and assessors of different backgrounds.*
>
> *(Salman and Gill, 2020)*

Risk assessment tools should be used in conjunction with other sources of information. Community Corrections Officers working with terrorist parolees in Australia (Cherney, 2021) expressed concern that 'there was sometimes a mismatch between supervision levels based on the assessed risk level according to the actuarial tool they used … and the existence of radicalised views and behaviours'. While these specific concerns related to the use of a generic risk assessment tool as opposed to a specific extremism-related tool, it

is still important to triangulate risk assessments with other data sources. (Copeland and Marsden, 2020b)

ENGAGING CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Interventions do engage with community and civil society actors, but such collaborations could be better utilised. Swedish research has illustrated the importance of engaging civil society in interventions, and how such actors could be better embedded in P/CVE policy and practice:

- The existing work of civil society organisations can complement P/CVE interventions. Some organisations have typically focused on trying to build resilience to violent extremism through their existing workstreams, rather than specific P/CVE interventions. In line with the earlier discussion of social-ecological approaches, this revolves around bridging social capital, 'building networks between diverse people and promoting understanding and cooperation between people with different social and ethnic backgrounds' (Wimelius et al., 2020).

- Civil society organisations are considered useful because those engaged in violent extremism are a 'difficult target group to reach by initiatives aimed at disengagement and deradicalisation run by state and public actors' (Christensen, 2020). These individuals may see the state as an enemy (Christensen, 2020), or even as a cause of radicalisation (Pilkington, 2020). In such

> *Efforts to fight radicalization in terms of counter terrorism and countering violent extremism strategies have increasingly been, if not replaced, then at least complemented by an emphasis put on resilience and prevention in many countries*
>
> *(Wimelius et al., 2020)*

instances, civil society actors are likely to have more credibility than state-run interventions.

- The Swedish approach to countering radicalisation is largely inclusive and participatory of civil society, but according to interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and local Muslim associations (n=14) challenges remain (Holdo, 2020):

  - Civil society organisations play different roles in Swedish counter-radicalisation interventions: as objects who offer tacit legitimacy to government interventions, but who do not actively participate; instruments who carry out tasks on behalf of the state, such as informing the public; and actors who deliver or lead local projects.

  - The Swedish approach may not be fully inclusive as the civil society organisations interviewed in this study were not yet *agents* who voice their own views about the role they want to play, question policy assumptions, and seek to influence the policy agenda. This is because Muslim associations fear being seen as radical if they challenge government assumptions, and fear that a more active role would be seen as tacit acceptance of these assumptions. [23]

OPERATIONAL AND COORDINATIONAL CHALLENGES

Establishing effective coordination across agencies is crucial but challenging. While research highlights the importance of multi-disciplinary interventions, recent research in Australia has pointed to key challenges facing secondary and tertiary interventions.

The Countering Violent Extremism Early Intervention Program (CVE EIP): Established in 2015, the CVE

EIP operates in a similar way to the UK's Channel intervention: individuals are referred to multi-agency panels, and if necessary, are offered tailored interventions. While the effectiveness of the CVE EIP has yet to be formally evaluated, interviews with 18 policymakers and practitioners identified several challenges (Harris-Hogan, 2020):

- The intervention was launched in a condensed time frame, which meant that the initial concept was not well-developed, and there was little initial guidance for practitioners.

- Each of the eight states and territories in which it is delivered structured the intervention differently, and there are disagreements between national and regional staff on how much local autonomy is desirable.

- Given the number of different stakeholders involved, there is some confusion over the program's overarching goals. For some it is to prevent radicalisation, others see it as a way to establish the capability for individually targeted interventions, and for others, it is to mitigate or reduce the risk posed by potential violent extremists.

The Proactive Integrated Support Mechanism (PRISM) discussed earlier is a pilot intervention delivered to individuals convicted of terrorist offences or identified as being at risk of radicalisation. Interviews with staff and recipients of the intervention (n=55), revealed several important lessons and challenges (Cherney, 2020):

- Winning the trust of participants is key. Obtaining consent can be time-consuming as offenders are worried about how participation might impact their prospects for release. It is also important to avoid blurring the intervention with intelligence

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23   The importance of allowing diverse voices to participate in the policy-making process is supported by earlier research conducted in the UK by Huq et al. (2011). Their survey of British Muslims found that trust in the authorities rested on a perception that policy had been developed in a procedurally just way, part of which involves providing opportunities to participate in the policy process.

> *[I]nterventions need to differentiate responses that tackle the motivations for individuals aligning with [different] groups*
>
> *(Cherney, 2020)*

collection, which is a key operational challenge identified in this study.

- Participants reported several benefits from participating including the intervention providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their religious beliefs and the factors that led to their offending behaviours or involvement in extremism.

- In-custody interventions benefit from being linked to the post-release context. When a recipient of PRISM is released, there is a handover process with the community corrections office. In some cases, PRISM staff continue to engage the individual during the parole process. However, some staff believe that this should be formalised and that it would be beneficial to formally extend PRISM into the community corrections context.

ADOPTING A TAILORED AND FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO TACKLING IDEOLOGY

Recent research has illustrated that countering different types of extremism will require different approaches and that focusing on counter-ideological work will not always be the best method.

There are often considerable differences within ideologies that need to be considered when delivering interventions:

- Practitioners in Australia have drawn a sharp distinction between an older cohort of prisoners influenced by al-Qaeda, and a young cohort influenced by IS (Cherney, 2020). The older cohort was more motivated by ideology and often had a good understanding of Islam, while some of the younger cohort had a poor understanding of Islam, and had a history of criminality, substance abuse, or mental health problems. As this younger cohort often experienced conflict around their sense of identity, work often focuses on addressing this issue rather than ideology.

- UK-based ethnographic research with 20 young people engaged in the far-right milieu found that they held a diverse range of beliefs, and often disagreed with other members of the milieu about key points such as the permissibility of violence, which suggests some will be more receptive to ideological challenge than others. Several (although not all) were more open to dialogue with 'out-groups', such as Muslim communities, than is often assumed in existing studies (Pilkington, 2020).

It may be beneficial to improve cognitive skills through psychological interventions prior to counter-ideological discussion. An analysis of behavioural checklists used to assess 66 participants in the Indonesian Terrorist Rehabilitation Programme found that individuals only exhibited an increased acceptance of democratic life when their 'cognitive flexibility and emotional expression aptness' was high (Muluk et al., 2020). In line with Cherney's (2021) research in Australia, the authors conclude that focusing on such factors first before attempting to tackle ideology may produce better deradicalisation outcomes. However, their findings are limited as they do not interview participants themselves.

Different ideological movements present different challenges. Interviews with 26 public servants in Sweden involved in P/CVE work suggested they saw right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist extremists differ in terms of 1) the threat they posed, including their propensity for violence; 2) their core values, and the alignment to wider society; and 3) the challenges that P/CVE interventions faced in working with each milieu including (Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020):

- Practitioners perceived that left-wing extremists faced fewer barriers to successful disengagement and reintegration. This was because they faced fewer threats from within the movement than those seeking to leave far-right groups and because their values were more closely aligned with mainstream society than other milieus.

- It was harder to identify signifiers of some extremist movements than others. Because the symbols of far-right extremism are better known, and because some are illegal, practitioners felt more confident in identifying them compared with symbols of left-wing or Islamist extremist movements, which suggests that further training is needed.

EMERGING RESEARCH AGENDAS

In addition to the core themes described above, several emerging research agendas have been identified. While these areas are underexplored, they point to important issues that warrant ongoing investigation.

GENDERED APPROACHES TO P/CVE

There is growing recognition of the need for gendered approaches to P/CVE. This includes reviews of 'women-centric' interventions (Winterbotham, 2020b) which have identified several different interventions focused specifically on women, alongside increasing recognition that approaches to engaging women in this space have often been rooted in and perpetuated gender stereotypes (Schmidt, 2020). This literature is not discussed here as it is the focus of a forthcoming CREST report on gender.

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Several studies have discussed the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on counter-terrorism and CVE practice. Empirical studies are rare, although one exception reports on an international survey of 50 local NGOs involved in CVE work (Rosand et al., 2020), which identified six concerns:

1. Young people spending increasing amounts of time online

2. The spread of disinformation about the pandemic within communities

3. A reduction in community policing and community-based intervention work as priorities shift

4. Government responses to the pandemic potentially exacerbating drivers of radicalisation

5. Flagging community confidence in local authorities, particularly where healthcare is strained

6. Foreign donors shifting funding away from P/CVE work towards COVID relief

The increasing amount of time young people are spending online is seen as a particular concern as it may provide a 'captive audience' for online propaganda (UNCTED, 2020). A recent analysis of US-based Google searches for white supremacist content found that between 30 March and 5 April 2020 there was a 'modest positive correlation' between state-level search traffic and the time spent under local lockdowns (Moonshot, 2020b).

Studies have also explored how extremist groups and their supporters are incorporating COVID-19 into their narratives, although the offline impact of these narratives is unclear. Key findings include:

- The incorporation of the pandemic into divisive social media content. Between 21 February and 17 April, Moonshot (2020c) identified 193,000 English-language Tweets 'indicative of conspiracy theories, hate speech, or incitements to violence related to COVID-19'.

- Using the pandemic to support extremist narratives. Daymon and Criezis (2020) analysed 442 items of online IS supporter content from Twitter, Telegram, or Rocket and identified 11 different themes and narratives relating to COVID-19, including counting the number of dead; conspiracy theories about the virus' origin; material offering ways to avoid boredom; content framing the pandemic as divine punishment; and presenting the pandemic as vindication.

- Jihadists see the pandemic as a potential opportunity. Several studies have discussed

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BOX 7

Adapting interventions in the time of COVID-19

In December 2020, the Radicalisation Awareness Network published insights from a meeting of P/CVE practitioners that had been held to explore how interventions are adapting to address operational challenges raised by the pandemic (RAN, 2020). This report makes a series of recommendations:

Supporting multi-agency interventions

Key learnings included investing in online collaboration platforms (and providing appropriate training in how to use them) and identifying a single point-of-contact within the local government who can stay abreast of changing rules and regulations and coordinate local intervention providers accordingly.

Detecting early signs of radicalisation

Local authorities should clarify how referral processes will operate during the pandemic; provide (online) updates of emerging local risks; include the consequences of COVID-19 in training materials; promote best practice and tools for engaging young people online; and use online tools such as ISD's 'HateMapper' which can be used to geolocate hateful content posted online, and to target interventions.

Reaching vulnerable young people

Innovations discussed included the Belgian city of Mechelen using webinars and online gaming tournaments to engage young people and practitioners meeting young people for 'sidewalk walks'.

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how online jihadist propaganda has framed the pandemic as an opportunity for them to claim territory or to conduct attacks while the authorities are preoccupied with COVID-19. This includes al-Lami (2020), who also cites BBC monitoring data on the activity of three jihadist groups which provides some insight into the real-world impact of such narratives:

- The rate of attacks claimed by these groups in March, when the pandemic 'started to take hold globally', showed no sign of decreasing from the previous two months.

- This data also showed that IS-claimed attacks had increased. However, given the potential operational constraints that lockdown measures and travel bans might place on violent extremist activity, it is unclear whether this trend remains today.

The link between online calls for violence and offline extremist activity remains unclear. While a recent UNCTED (2020) paper noted there was 'some connection between COVID-19-related narratives and real-world activity' based on incidents such as attempted attacks against a hospital treating COVID-19 patients, it cautions against conflating correlation with causation when interpreting such events.

IDIOSYNCRATIC IDEOLOGIES

There has been growing research into idiosyncratic ideologies. These can be 'novel' or 'hybrid' (Norris, 2020). An example of a novel ideology is the incel community, the ideological and material features of which are beginning to be examined (Tomkinson et al., 2020; Wilson, 2020). For example, Regehr (2020) draws on interviews, video footage and online content to outline a five-step process of escalating online engagement in this movement:

1. Vulnerable individuals begin to seek companionship to deal with their loneliness.

2. Incel ideologies transform loneliness into anger with a misogynistic focus.

3. The ideology 'fills a void' for these young men and is normalised through online activity.

4. There is an online echo chamber that amplifies and reinforces the ideology.

5. The online deification of mass murderers creates a 'continuous loop' that 'promotes future acts of violence'. However, it is unclear why some individuals transition to offline violence.

A hybrid ideology is the fusing of two or more ideologies. There has been a growing public discussion of idiosyncratic ideologies in the wake of rising numbers of individuals with a 'mixed, unstable or unclear' ideology being referred to Channel. Research on this topic is limited to theoretical studies such as Koehler's (2020b) exploration of individuals who shifted across opposing ideologies.

However, recent studies have pointed to the growing role that conspiracy theories have come to play in extremist narratives (Allington, 2021) and have illustrated how conspiracy mentalities can contribute to future violent extremist intentions (Rottweiler and Gill, 2020).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the above review of contemporary literature, important areas for future research include:

- Robust evaluations of existing interventions, with a particular focus on interventions that use formers and those delivered online.

- Studies that map the engagement and disengagement pathways of former extremists against current intervention practice.

- Empirical research into the social-ecology of deradicalisation and disengagement.

- Continued research into those emerging trends identified in this report, including the risks posed by emerging ideologies and more empirical studies into the impact that COVID-19 and associated national lockdowns are having on risks of radicalisation.

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