

***Investing in CVE and terrorism prevention program
assessment and evaluation***

Susan Szmania

From: Andreas Armbrorst, Erich Marks, Catrin Trautmann, Simone Ullrich (Eds.):
Countering Violent Extremism
Building an evidence-base for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism
Pro BUSINESS GmbH 2018, Page 91-98
978-3-96409-063-8 (Printausgabe)

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Abstract

This policy essay outlines four areas for investment in countering violent extremism (CVE) and terrorism prevention program evaluation, including: (1) a recognition that there are some metrics that exist in the field; (2) a willingness to look at how related fields in prevention science have contributed to terrorism prevention programming; (3) continued development of specialized tools for assessing CVE program metrics; and (3) creation of long-term meta-analysis frameworks for assessment of CVE / terrorism prevention programs. Following a discussion of these points, next steps for implementing these goals are discussed.

Introduction

Over the last several years, terrorism prevention programs – also known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE) initiatives – have risen to prominence at the local, federal, and international levels. The major tenets of the international terrorism prevention agenda are outlined in documents such as the United Nations’ 2015 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, which underscores “... a need to take a more comprehensive approach [to counter-terrorism] which encompasses not only ongoing, essential security-based counter-terrorism measures, but also systematic preventative measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism ...”¹ As such, the preventative counterterrorism agenda has come to be viewed as a complement to traditional policing and investigation work, which is focused on disrupting and dismantling criminal networks and activities. Instead, terrorism prevention or CVE typically addresses factors that occur before criminal activity takes place and often calls upon members of society to be a part of the early solutions to intervene in the radicalization process and build community resilience.

Strategies and frameworks for addressing terrorism prevention priorities have appeared around the world. For instance, in the most recent 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy the White House calls upon not only law enforcement but also civic leaders as well as the private sector to support efforts to combat radicalisation and recruitment in communities.² International organisations like the Global Counterterrorism Forum have also provided guidance and good practices concerning the engagement of a wide spectrum of actors in prevention activities, including families, religious leaders, health professionals and educators.³ Local cities have also crafted various approaches to CVE as demonstrated by participating municipalities in the international Strong Cities network.⁴

Yet, despite policymakers’ interest and enthusiasm for adopting terrorism prevention policies and programs, the literature on the efficacy of counterterrorism measures, and more specifically CVE and terrorism prevention efforts, remains slim (e.g., Crenshaw and LaFree, 2017).⁵ This dearth of formal program evaluation data stems from many fac-

¹ See: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

² See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

³ See: <https://www.thegctf.org/Working-Groups/Countering-Violent-Extremism>.

⁴ See: <http://strongcitiesnetwork.org/>.

⁵ See: <http://www.brookings.edu/book/countering-terrorism-no-simple-solutions/>.

tors, including what some have described as a “lack of coherence in the field” (Romaniuk, 2015, p. 30).⁶ It remains true that CVE terminology is ill-defined and the parameters of CVE programs remain contested, especially when comparing programs across international contexts. Further, many CVE programs have been supported through government sponsorship which may not always result in data being reported publicly or in peer-reviewed journals.

Despite these institutional challenges, there are promising signs that a terrorism prevention agenda is supported by evidence from related prevention sciences. To build a more sustainable institutional framework for supporting terrorism prevention and CVE efforts, this essay outlines four areas in need of investment, both for practical program development as well as strategic policy planning purposes. Following a review of these four areas, suggestions for advancing this framework are put forward.

We are not “starting from scratch” on CVE metrics

Far too frequently in high-level discussions about CVE and terrorism prevention programs policymakers are quick to note that there is little evidence that these programs work. In reality, within the last five years there is a growing body of program data to help illuminate what works in terrorism prevention programming. These findings prompted Romaniuk (2015) to observe that “we are not starting from scratch” on CVE program evaluation even though data remain scattered across many fields and is often descriptive in nature. Mastroe and Szmania (2016), for example, systematically reviewed publicly-available reports from over forty CVE programs to catalogue the program type and metrics collected. They found that, while most programs reported output rather than outcome data and none of the evaluations were based on more rigorous experimental design, available data could be used to draw some conclusions about promising practices in CVE prevention, disengagement and de-radicalisation programs.⁷

New evaluation data is becoming more widely available, and while results are highly specific to each program, the data from these evaluations provides a range of results from descriptive process assessment to more rigorous impact evaluation. Recently, Weine, Younis and Polutnik’s (2017) process evaluation of a community policing

⁶ See: http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Does-CVE-Work_2015.pdf.

⁷ See: https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_SurveyingCVMetrics_March2016.pdf.

approach to CVE in Los Angeles, California, U.S.A., helpfully illuminated program dimensions that might be enhanced based upon their review of data, including addressing “challenges growing up Muslim in America today; challenges for parents and families; challenges for mosques and Imams; bias against Muslims; and [a] history of [law enforcement] surveillance and sting operations” in the local community (p. 2).⁸ Internationally, an outcome evaluation by the non-governmental organization Mercy Corps (2017) assessed a CVE program in Somalia which found that increasing youth access to education coupled with opportunities for youth civic participation “fulfills a common desire among youth – the desire to do something positive, meaningful, and impactful” (p. 2).⁹

While these evaluations are helpful on a program level, there is still a need to pull this work together more comprehensively in order to foster a “culture of learning” among terrorism prevention specialists. To that end, the U.S. Institute of Peace has supported the development of the Researching Solutions to Violent Extremism (RESOLVE) network of scholars, practitioners, organisations, and policymakers who are “committed to empirically driven, locally-defined research on the drivers of violent extremism and sources of community resilience.”¹⁰ Certainly, this effort and others like it will help to build the knowledge-base about CVE and promote the sharing and integration of data and results to improve CVE practice.

Related fields in prevention sciences can contribute to our understanding of “what works” in terrorism prevention

Given that program data on CVE and terrorism prevention efforts will require time to develop, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have looked at related fields in the prevention sciences for evidence of good practices to model in terrorism prevention work. To date, here are a variety of fields that have contributed to the increase the knowledge that exists about “what works” in terrorism prevention. Notably, public health experts Stevan Weine and David Eisenman have written extensively on adapting the three-tiered approach to public health intervention in the CVE context by: (1) limiting exposure to hazards among the general population; (2) directly engaging with at-

⁸ See: <http://www.start.umd.edu/publication/community-policing-counter-violent-extremism-process-evaluation-los-angeles>.

⁹ See: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CRITICAL_CHOICES_REPORT_FINAL_DIGITAL.pdf.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.resolvenet.org/about-us>.

risk populations; and (3) supporting those individuals who have already adopted violent ideologies or engaged with violent extremists.¹¹ This framework has allowed terrorism prevention policymakers and practitioners to be more specific in the types of programs they develop and what audiences they intend to engage through their work.

The field of community policing has also greatly influenced the work of CVE and terrorism prevention efforts. For example, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) outlined five key principles for using community policing tactics to combat violent extremism by building trust across a diverse network of partners in order to improve safety and security in communities.¹² These core principles stem from common community policing practices which have been subject to review and assessment over the last decade. While there are still relatively few impact evaluations to draw from, meta-analysis of community policing programs reveals that a variety of policing activities do increase citizens' trust and satisfaction in police work, although there is no statistically significant finding that community policing reduce crime rates (Gill, Weisburd, Telep, Vitter and Bennett, 2014).¹³ This conclusion suggests that further research is needed to assess the impact of community policing approach as it relates to outcomes and objectives in community policing programs aimed at terrorism prevention.

A third field which has contributed toward our understanding of what works in terrorism prevention programs comes from gang violence prevention efforts. Recently, the U.S. Agency for International Development published a report assessing learning from programs to reduce street gang violence and counter violent extremist organizations.¹⁴ The report provides discussion on how street gangs and violent extremist organizations are both similar and different from one another, and it offers a set of recommendations for learning across the two fields. In addition, metrics for assessing programming in these fields are proposed: violence and crime statistics; support for extremist views or groups; perceptions of security; attitudes toward government; and individual and community resilience measures. In sum, it is clear that learning from these and other related prevention science fields may yield helpful insights, not only for terrorism prevention practice but

¹¹ See: <http://www.start.umd.edu/news/how-public-health-can-improve-initiatives-counter-violent-extremism>.

¹² See: <http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/documents/pdfs/Final%20Key%20Principles%20Guide.pdf>.

¹³ See: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11292-014-9210-y>.

¹⁴ See: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00MPHK.pdf.

also for useful models of measurement and evaluation in counterterrorism more generally.

There is growing recognition of the need for and development of resources to build monitoring and assessment activities into early phases of CVE program design, including digital counter-messaging initiatives

As research on CVE and terrorism prevention programs becomes more widely available, there has been a concerted effort to expand the availability of resources for CVE program assessment. For instance, the U.S.-based think tank RAND Corporation, with support from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, published a toolkit to assist CVE program staff develop stronger logic models and evaluation measures to improve program delivery.¹⁵ Likewise, the Royal United Services Institute in the United Kingdom produced a practical guide for CVE program design and risk reduction.¹⁶ Many of the basic program monitoring protocols included in these resources will be familiar to most evaluation and assessment practitioners, such as building a CVE program “theory of change,” crafting a “logic model,” minimizing risk to participants, assessing outputs, and measuring progress toward stated program objectives. Importantly, these resources have allowed for most CVE programs to begin programming with evaluation in mind.

Additionally, policymakers and practitioners have also called for the creation or adaptation of tools to better assess and measure online CVE programs. Some of these tools require institutional support. For example, the Digital Forum on Terrorism Prevention, held in Washington, D.C., in late September 2017, brought together experts from government, the technology industry, startups, and community-based organizations to discuss methods for stopping terrorist exploitation of the internet.¹⁷ In particular, experts called for funding support from governments to undertake assessments that last beyond the typical one-to-two year evaluation period in order to understand the longer-term impact of counter-messaging efforts. In the final report industry experts also suggested that government may “play a role in mandating for consistent sets of measurements across federally funded terrorism prevention programs” (p. 10). Moreover, participants highlighted pro-

¹⁵ See: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL243.html>.

¹⁶ See: <https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/countering-violent-extremism-and-risk-reduction-guide-programme-design>.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/executive-summary-digital-forum-terrorism-prevention>.

mising intervention programs such as The Redirect Method,¹⁸ which have shown that some messaging campaigns can influence behavior changes among a target audience of those individuals most susceptible to terrorist propaganda.

Impact frameworks from other prevention initiatives can point the way to the future for more comprehensive evaluation of terrorism prevention programs

As evaluation data become more available, a challenge for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers will be to make sense of disparate findings. Ultimately, this meta-analysis work will require institutions and governments to carefully consider how to standardise data collection across programs. This will also mean an increased need for replicating work across locations rather than funding “stand-alone” pilot programs. While gathering data points into a comprehensive framework is a daunting task, there are models that the CVE community can follow in fields such as community policing, public health, and criminal justice. For instance, George Mason University’s Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy in Virginia, U.S.A., has developed a matrix that evaluates over 150 studies on police interventions. The matrix organizes the findings into “realms of effectiveness” which can provide program designers with a better idea of what types of programs achieve more positive results.¹⁹ Another approach developed by the U.S. Health and Human Services Department’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association builds a national registry of over 300 evidence-based programs which can be searched in a single database.²⁰ The purpose of the registry is to provide the public with information about promising interventions as each program included in the registry has been independently rated by reviewers along a series of criteria. The associated web portal provides a range of services and resources, such as grant funding notification and even a learning center, where more information can be found. As the CVE field matures, a consolidated resource such as a national or international registry could provide similar information to terrorism prevention practitioners, scholars and policymakers.

¹⁸ See: <https://redirectmethod.org/>.

¹⁹ See: <http://cebcp.org/evidence-based-policing/the-matrix/>.

²⁰ See: <https://nrepp.samhsa.gov/landing.aspx>.

Conclusion

In closing, funding for assessment and evaluation of CVE programming is certainly required for the field to develop. Efforts to assess and evaluate programs are underway but must be continued in the short and the long-term in order to build a stronger evidence base for “what works” and what does not work. At the national level, governments must continue to support this work with the recognition that many programs will be carried out in local communities. While securing program funding across federal and local levels can be challenging bureaucratically, it is needed in order to obtain useful results.

Yet, funding alone will not be sufficient to improve knowledge about what works in terrorism prevention. International cooperation and strong partnerships across research, practice, and policymaking is also necessary. To that end, efforts such as the CVE conference held in Hannover, Germany, in June 2017 are an important step toward increasing collaboration among experts, sharing emerging work and assessing promising practices. Ideally, this collaboration can be further expanded through joint training opportunities and skill-building workshops to enhance practice. Ultimately, it is important to keep in mind that terrorism prevention work will not be judged solely by research findings alone but also by the safety and security that citizens experience in their day-to-day lives.

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