

## Radicalization in Correctional Systems: A Scoping Review of the Literature Evaluating the Effectiveness of Preventing and Countering Interventions

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### Abstract

Although several prevention and countering radicalization programs in correctional institutions have been carried out in Europe and worldwide, little is known about their effectiveness. Thus, the current scoping review aimed at reporting on the state of the art of the literature assessing and evaluating such actions, identifying knowledge gaps, and examining methods used to assess their successfulness and impact. A total of eight studies that met eligibility criteria were reviewed after performing a search on Scopus, Web of Science, and PsychInfo (Ebsco) databases: Two studies evaluated a reintegration initiative based in the Netherlands; four focused on an Australian disengagement program; and two offered insights on a rehabilitation program carried out in Sri Lanka. Findings were discussed according to their evaluation methods (qualitative, mixed-methods, and quantitative) and instruments. Results highlighted that the evaluation process is still confronted with several methodological difficulties, such as a lack of agreement on how to univocally define and measure success and the identification of uniform indicators of deradicalization and disengagement. Additionally, results revealed that the effectiveness of these interventions is predominantly based on anecdotal evidence rather than on rigorous, empirical proofs. As such, it was not possible to compare these programs and determine which worked best. Suggestions for future research and practical implications for policymakers, prison governors, and practitioners are offered in the concluding section of this work.

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### Introduction

Prisons have been identified as key players in the fight against radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism (Schultz et al., 2021). Indeed, on the one hand, prisons are in charge

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of treating and managing inmates who have committed terrorism-related offenses (Williams, 2016); on the other hand, they have to detect radicalization occurring among prisoners (Chantraine & Scheer, 2021; González-Álvarez et al., 2022; Schultz et al., 2021). Presumably, radicalization processes in prison might pose a risk to global security as offenders' commitment to monolithic views of the world and engagement in militant activities might continue and result in enacting violent actions and terrorist attacks upon release (Clifford, 2018; Sinai, 2014). Thus, there is urgency to identify good practices to prevent and counter this phenomenon among at-risk, suspected, and radicalized convicts.

In the attempt to buffer the spread of radicalization among inmates, to deradicalize, disengage, and reintegrate those who radicalized prior to or during their time in custody, several initiatives have been implemented in correctional systems in Europe and across the world (Neumann, 2010; Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN], 2019; Ronco et al., 2019; Speckhard, 2011; Vidino & Clifford, 2019). Unfortunately, as it has been outlined, it is still unclear whether these interventions are really effective and what elements in them promote change (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017).

Up to now, several syntheses of the literature sought to collect and recapitulate actions aimed at preventing and countering radicalization both inside and outside the criminal justice system (e.g., Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Jugl et al., 2021; McBride, 2022; Morrison et al., 2021; Pistone et al., 2019). More recently, Axelsson and colleagues' scoping review (2023) focused on violent extremists' management and treatment in prisons and probation services. In particular, the authors reported on methods and approaches adopted by correctional institutions to work with violent extremist clients, but offered limited insights on methodologies, techniques, and procedures used to evaluate the effectiveness of these actions. Thus, in the attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of what is going on in the field of evaluation of programs performed inside correctional institutions to counter radicalization, this scoping review has the broader goal of collecting the available empirical studies assessing interventions for radicalization in penal systems and evaluating their efficacy. In doing so, specifically, we aimed at determining the coverage of the body of literature in this field while identifying knowledge gaps and examining methods and techniques used to assess the successfulness and the impact of initiatives against radicalization carried out inside the justice

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system. Before reviewing the related research, we first conceptualize radicalization and then determine the nexus between prison environments and this phenomenon.

### *Defining Radicalization*

The term *radicalization* describes a process by which individuals adopt a set of extremist beliefs that might legitimate the use of violent means to achieve a societal change (Dandurand, 2015; Maskaliūnaitė, 2015). Motives and goals pushing people to radicalize are diverse, including ethnic, religious, and political factors (Doosje et al., 2016). Generally, *cognitive radicalization* has been distinguished from *behavioral radicalization*, with the former referring to the commitment to worldviews deviating from those of mainstream society and the latter to the engagement in a wide range of activities that might culminate in violent extremist actions and in terrorism (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

In an attempt to understand why people might radicalize and engage in violent behaviors, scholars have proposed several psycho-social explanations (for a review, see Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). For instance, some have focused on individual vulnerabilities as drivers of radicalization and violent extremism (e.g., the need for meaning and identity; Borum, 2014), while others have stressed the role of group processes and intergroup relations (e.g., Gøtzsche-Astrup et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). In addition, radicalization experts have delineated phase models describing how radicalization evolves toward violence (King & Taylor, 2011), but the underlying idea that this phenomenon is linear, proceeds in stages, and inevitably results in brutal actions has often been questioned and doubted (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

Concurrently, the literature has detected possible risk factors setting the stage for radical attitudes and behaviors (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). Broadly speaking, these factors have been identified at the *individual* level, such as experiencing personal uncertainty; at the *micro-environmental* level, such as influences from families and friends; and at the *macro-environmental* level, such as social exclusion and discrimination (Campelo et al., 2018; Iannello et al., 2021). Therefore, it could be concluded that there are multiple pathways leading people to become cognitively and emotionally open to extremist ideologies and groups (McGilloway et al., 2015). However, it has been argued that radicalization stems from the interplay of both individual and contextual variables (Beelmann, 2020; Costabile et al.,

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2021). This *person-context* interaction seems to particularly apply to the radicalization processes which take place within prison settings.

### *Correctional Institutions and Radicalization*

The role prisons might play in inmates' radicalization has been largely debated among scholars (Bove & Böhmelt, 2022; Bucerus et al., 2023; Jones, 2014; Williams & Liebling, 2023). In particular, it has been suggested that prisons' characteristics, regimes, and climates, as well as the inmate social system and moral code, might facilitate or impede the spread of violence and radical narratives among detainees (Jones, 2014; Williams & Liebling, 2023). Consequently, it could be concluded that prisons might foster individuals' radicalization under certain circumstances. In this regard, some literature has identified risk factors specific to correctional systems that might pave the way for inmates' engagement in and even greater support for extreme ideologies and groups (e.g., Neumann, 2010; Thompson, 2016).

Among individual variables, a personal crisis after incarceration is a key risk factor for radicalization (Tiscini & Lamote, 2019). Indeed, prisoners have to deal with finding themselves forced to live isolated from the larger society and in an unfamiliar context (Basra & Neumann, 2016) where they might experience a sense of loss of personal significance. This circumstance might lead them to endorse radical views or strengthen their ties with extremist groups, which might help them reestablish self-certainty (Kruglanski et al., 2013).

Conditions, values, and procedures prevailing in prisons, as well, are thought to enhance and decrease the likelihood that prisoners will radicalize (Khosrokhavar, 2013) or reinforce their extremist aspirations (Neumann, 2010). For instance, prison contexts that both expose individuals to deprivation and humiliation and do not provide them with educational programs or job opportunities are likely to exacerbate radicalization (Thompson, 2016).

Furthermore, prison settings that do not promote positive relationships between staff and inmates are likely to contribute to prisoners' feelings of mistrust and resentment toward authority figures (Williams, 2016), which might set the stage for or consolidate radical ideas and behaviors. Similarly, understaffing and overcrowding are organizational causes of prison radicalization, as understaffing results in a lack of control over inmates who might be freer to

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recruit other convicts and spread extreme ideologies, whereas overcrowding makes it more difficult to detect prisoners' signals of radicalization (Khosrokhavar, 2013; Neumann, 2010). Briefly, prisons that do not respect human rights and are unhealthy and unsafe might create a radicalized culture (RAN, 2016) in which vulnerable prisoners might seek refuge within sub-groups providing them with a sense of security and brotherhood, under the influence of charismatic leaders (Asrori et al., 2020). Likewise, in such a context fully extremist inmates might continue to radicalize and proselytize (Neumann, 2010).

### *Preventing and Countering Radicalization in Correctional Systems*

Although prisons might be regarded as fertile grounds for radicalization (Cilluffo et al., 2007), prisons can also contribute to its containment and disruption (RAN, 2016). Relatedly, recommendations, practices, and measures to deal with radicalization within prison settings have been compiled (Neumann, 2010; RAN, 2016; Ronco et al., 2019; Vidino & Clifford, 2019; Williams, 2016). According to radicalization experts, it is important to provide offenders with a safe, humane, and respectful environment to prevent them from both initiating their pathway toward radicalization or corroborating the radical belief system they already possess (Neumann, 2010; Williams, 2016). Also, it is necessary to combine strategies based on security and control over radical, suspected, or at-risk inmates with re-educational and rehabilitation programs (Neumann, 2010), as the latter might help offenders reconsider their views, abandon extremist groups, and sustain them in their eventual transition back into mainstream society (RAN, 2016; Bove & Böhmelt, 2022).

Different types of initiatives have been performed inside correctional institutions across Europe and worldwide to prevent and counter offenders' radicalization and violent extremism (Neumann, 2010; RAN, 2019; Ronco et al., 2019; Vidino & Clifford, 2019). Generally, such actions aim at encouraging radical individuals to abandon their belief system (*deradicalization*) and/or to cease their involvement in extremist actions (*disengagement*; Horgan, 2008). Interestingly, Silke stressed that disengagement is "likely a more realistic outcome" (Silke, 2011, p. 18) than deradicalization. Indeed, individuals might not reject their ideologies and views of the world, but might decide to delegitimize the use of violence and

abstain from brutal actions even though they are still in a radical movement (Horgan & Braddock, 2010).

To clarify, *preventing programs* aim at building resilience to radicalization among the general population, whereas *countering programs* target potentially or already radicalized individuals (Sjøen & Jore, 2019). However, it has been noticed that deradicalization programs might be related to the prevention framework “in the sense that they prevent recidivism into violent extremism” (Koehler, 2017, p. 92). Based on this argumentation, in this scoping review *prevent* and *counter* are seen as interchangeable terms referring to programs aimed at combating radicalism and violent extremism.

#### *On the Evaluation of Preventing and Countering Radicalization Programs*

Despite the increasing number of initiatives aimed at dismantling inmates’ radical attitudes and behaviors, the evaluation of such actions is still confronted with several challenges at a conceptual, methodological, and practical level (Glazzard, 2022; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Koehler, 2017; Veldhuis, 2012; Williams & Kleinman, 2014).

Theoretically speaking, there is still a lack of conceptual clarity over the expected outcomes of these types of interventions (Glazzard, 2022). From a methodological point of view, questions arise about what variables should be measured to best ascertain programs’ efficacy (Williams & Kleinman, 2014) and how to establish causality between participation in a given action and individuals’ positive changes (Koehler, 2017). In this regard, low recidivism rates have been considered as markers of success, but their validity might be undermined by several factors: for instance, some cases of reoffending behaviors might not be registered since they might occur long after release (Renard, 2020).

In practical terms, in addition to the issues of investing the necessary amount of resources, such as time, money, and personnel, to perform the evaluation (Lipsey et al., 2006; Williams & Kleinman, 2014), a central question is about who it is in charge of assessing programs’ effectiveness. Indeed, on the one hand, “there is little expectation that internal evaluation would result in negative outcomes being made public”, on the other hand, “external evaluation raises other challenges” (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 281), such as



those regarding the chance to have access to program data and information (McBride et al., 2022).

### *The Current Study*

In the light of what sketched above, it seems difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of initiatives against radicalization carried out inside the penal system and to establish which program works best (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017). Also, it seems that the psychological mechanisms that underlie these actions and promote deradicalization and disengagement are underexplored. Based on these considerations, in the present work we sought to identify the existing evidence concerning the evaluation of programs against radicalization performed within *correctional institutions* (e.g., prisons, probation services, and rehabilitation centers) inside and outside Europe. In doing this, we had the general aims of formulating a map of the research on the assessment of such actions and of shedding light on methods, techniques and procedures adopted to evaluate these initiatives. At the same time, we had the specific goal to discover both those factors that might contribute to the success of a given intervention and those possible explanatory processes connecting programs' activities with participants' positive changes in attitudes and behaviors. With these being the main goals, we opted for performing a scoping review, as it is a useful tool for contextualizing knowledge and detecting what is currently known in the literature (Anderson et al., 2008; Munn et al., 2018).

## **Method**

### *Selection of Studies*

Studies for this scoping review were identified in two ways. First of all, the electronic Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycInfo (Ebsco) databases were queried on December 2022. The following search terms were used: (radical\* OR extrem\* OR terror\*) AND (interven\* OR program\* OR train\* OR treat\*) AND (prevent\* OR diseng\* OR deradical\* OR counter\*) AND (eval\* OR impact\* OR effect\*) AND (prison\* OR jail\* OR "correctional facilit\*" OR inmate\* OR probat\* OR convict\*). The search included no time span or geographic region constraints and any type of publication (e.g., book chapters, peer reviewed articles) was

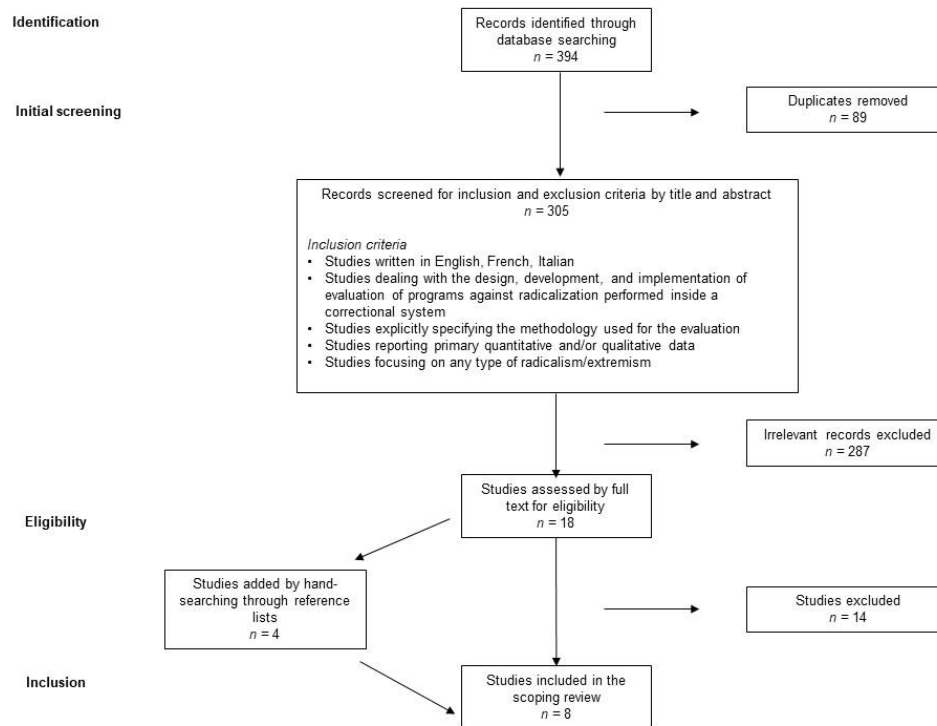
considered, but it was narrowed to publications in English, Italian, and French. A further search was conducted by searching the reference lists of the preliminarily eligible studies.

To be included in the final scoping review, a study, regardless of the type of publication, had to (a) be published in English, French, or Italian; (b) clearly deal with the design, development, and implementation of evaluation of programs against radicalization performed inside a correctional system (e.g., prisons, probation settings, rehabilitation centers); (c) explicitly specify the methodology used for the evaluation; (d) report primary quantitative and/or qualitative data; and (d) target any type of extremism/radicalism.

Figure 1 shows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009) flow diagram, detailing study selection. The initial search resulted in 394 records. After removing 89 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of 305 publications were screened. Screening identified 18 studies appearing to meet inclusion criteria. After reading the retrieved full-text of the eligible studies, four met the inclusion criteria, while four new studies were incorporated afterwards by the hand-searching of the reference lists of eligible studies.



**Figure 1**  
*PRISMA Diagram Illustrating the Literature Selection Process*



### *Classification of Studies*

As we were interested in identifying methods and procedures to evaluate programs against radicalization performed inside correctional institutions rather than approaches to manage and treat violent extremists (see Axelsson et al., 2023), we decided to group the scoped works by a primary accounting of their evaluation design, methodologies, and instruments (e.g., Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; McBride et al., 2022). Concurrently, we provided a broad, descriptive report of findings to shed light on points of strength and weakness and on the efficacy of each initiative.

### *Descriptive Data*

As mentioned above, eight studies met criteria for final inclusion in this scoping review, including seven articles and one book chapter. Their main characteristics are reported in Table 1. In general, two studies evaluated a reintegration initiative based in the Netherlands (Schuurman & Bakker, 2015; van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018); four studies focused on an

Australian custody-based, case-managed disengagement program (Cherney, 2018; Cherney, 2020; Cherney & Belton, 2020; Cherney & Belton, 2021); and two studies offered insights on a Sri Lankan rehabilitation program carried out in correctional facilities in Sri Lanka (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2018).

**Table 1**

*Main Characteristics of the Eight Included Studies*

Article ref.	Country	Participants	Intervention name and aims	Evaluation type (qualitative, quantitative) and instruments	Main results
Cherney, A. (2018)	Australia	12 previous and current participants (11 males and 1 female: 11 Muslims and 1 White supremacist; 6 offenders in custody and 6 on parole; 5 had committed terrorism-related offences, 7 had been identified at risk of radicalization). 10 PRISM staff	PRISM (Proactive Integrated Support Model) aims to redirect offenders away from extremism and help them transition out of custody through individually tailored intervention plans	Qualitative. Interviews	Inmates and parolees described different benefits they derived from PRISM, which included skills to deal with stress, anxiety, and frustration resulting from being incarcerated, self-reflection, and critical thinking. Staff confirmed these participants' changes
Cherney, A. (2020)	Australia	28 interviewees involved in the project including 6 offenders (all male Muslims) of which 2 were parolees and 4 were serving a period of incarceration for a terrorist-related offence)	see Cherney (2018)	Qualitative. Interviews	Participants gained insights into their radicalization, learned to cope with their time in custody and were prepared for release. Difficulties in recruiting participants were reported by staff.

Cherney, A., & Belton, E. (2020)	Australia	3 case studies, including 2 young and 1 middle-aged males that were Muslims (x2) and one White supremacist	see Cherney (2018)	Mixed methods. Quantitative coding of qualitative sources	All 3 clients showed improvements in behavioral and cognitive domains relevant to disengagement. Progression varied across cases.
Cherney, A., & Belton, E. (2021)	Australia	14 clients ( $M_{age} = 33$ ; 92.9% Muslims)	see Cherney (2018)	Mixed methods. Quantitative coding of case notes of participants	A significant positive correlation was found between the length of engagement in the PRISM program and disengagement.
Kruglanski et al. (2014)	Sri Lanka	1,906 individuals in the rehabilitation group (169 women and 1,737 men; $M_{age} = 27.54$ ); 152 detainees/beneficiaries in the control group ( $M_{age} = 30.22$ )	The Sri Lankan rehabilitation program is composed of different programs aimed at equipping beneficiaries with new capabilities and facilitating their transition back into society.	Quantitative. Questionnaires measuring support for armed struggle, positive attitudes toward personnel, and organizational embeddedness	Support for armed struggle declined over time in the rehabilitation program (vs. barely any changes in the control group). Positive changes in attitudes toward the personnel moderated changes in support for armed struggle only in the rehabilitation group.
Schuurman, B., & Bakker, E. (2015)	The Netherlands	Program staff and project's liaison from the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism	The Dutch Reintegration Program is aimed at reducing recidivism of violent extremism among offenders by promoting cognitive interventions (e.g., talking about ideology), bettering participants' social	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews	Cognitive and operational assumptions underlying the initiative, the process of evaluation, the project's effectiveness and obstacles were described. Reports on 5 participants: In two cases, the project was not successful. The other 3 participants showed progress. However, no

			conditions, and distancing them from extremist worldviews and networks		conclusive verdict on the program was offered as no participants had yet completed the full reintegration process.
van der Heide, L., & Schuurman, B. (2018)	The Netherlands	Program staff, partner agencies, organizations involved	see Schuurman & Bakker (2015)	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews	Although the goal of minimizing terrorism-related recidivism seemed to be achieved (only 8 clients of the 189 supervised had terrorism-related recidivism), the impact evaluation was mainly dependent on staff's interpretations.
Webber, D. et al. (2018)	Sri Lanka	Study 1: 490 full-treatment beneficiaries ( $M_{age} = 24.97$ ); 111 minimal treatment beneficiaries ( $M_{age} = 29.18$ ).  Study 2: 179 (85 female; $M_{age} = 31.15$ ) former LTTE and 144 (86 female; $M_{age} = 30.33$ ) Tamil community members who never belonged to LTTE organization	see Kruglanski et al. (2014)	Quantitative. Questionnaires measuring, among other variables, embeddedness, rehabilitation attitudes, loss of significance, extremism	Study 1: Beneficiaries of full rehabilitation showed significantly lower extremism than those receiving minimal treatment across 1 year. Positive experiences in rehabilitation buffered beneficiaries' feelings of insignificance, which reduced violent extremism endorsement over time. Study 2: Beneficiaries showed less extremism than Tamils who never belonged to the LTTE organization. Beneficiaries with more positive recollections of rehabilitation

					<p>reported less extremism and nostalgia for LTTE and greater positivity toward the Sinhalese and the Sri Lanka government directly and indirectly by means of lower reported insignificance. Beneficiaries who had been involved in a greater number of activities showed reduced insignificance, which resulted in lesser extremism, nostalgia, and in greater positivity towards the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan government.</p>
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## Results

### *Evaluation Methods and Instruments*

Four studies in the current scoping review used qualitative methods and instruments to evaluate programs aimed at preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism among at-risk or fully radicalized offenders. Two works (Schuurman and Bakker, 2015; van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018) investigated the effectiveness of the Dutch Reintegration Program targeting offenders on probation or parole who were suspected to be or were implicated in jihadist extremism or terrorism. This initiative was launched in 2012 and was the result of the partnership between the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism and the Dutch Probation Service. In detail, preliminary insights on this program were obtained by using semi-structured interviews with program staff and the project’s liaison from the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, which allowed researchers to document the development of the initiative over 1 year (2013–

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2014; Schuurman and Bakker, 2015). An additional study explored the years 2016-2018 and provided insights on this project through semi-structured interviews with program staff, partner agencies, and organizations involved (van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018). In both studies, the authors were independent scholars in charge of carrying out the evaluation.

Two other qualitative studies reported on the evaluation of the custody-based, case-managed, countering violent extremism program named the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM). This initiative was delivered by Corrective Services in the Australian State of New South Wales and aimed at prison inmates convicted of terrorism or considered at-risk of radicalization. An evaluation of the early implementation of the program was provided by Cherney (2020) by utilizing interviews with staff, clients, and various key informants (e.g., prison chaplains). A follow-up evaluation was carried out by interviewing staff and clients and comparing their perceptions of the program (Cherney, 2018).

The four remaining studies adopted quantitative instruments or mixed methods to assess the effectiveness of programs preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism among radicalized offenders or those considered vulnerable. Two studies were additional evaluations of the PRISM intervention described above. In detail, in one study (Cherney & Belton, 2021) a quantitative assessment of disengagement was offered by coding case note data of participants. In particular, evidence of progress was recorded over time (i.e., across different periods of engagement in the project) according to a list of parameters of disengagement detected and coded within participants' case note data. In another study, Cherney and Belton (2020) adopted Barrelle's pro-integration model as a theoretical background for the assessment of the disengagement of three PRISM clients. This evaluation relied on various data sources, such as case notes, interviews with clients and staff, and progress reports written by PRISM staff. By coding these qualitative sources, Cherney and Belton (2020) sought to numerically measure participants' progress across each domain and sub-domain of Barrelle's (2015) model of extremist disengagement.

Kruglanski and colleagues (2014) and Webber et al. (2018) reported on the quantitative assessment of the Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Program for former members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a terrorist organization active from 1976 in Sri Lanka in response to the perceived inequalities between the two major ethnic groups - the

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minority Tamil and the majority Sinhalese - until its defeat in 2009. The program was implemented in rehabilitation facilities in Sri Lanka and involved detainees in several programs (educational, vocational, psychological, spiritual, recreational, cultural/family, and community rehabilitation) that favored their psychological empowerment and reintegration into society.

Both Kruglanski and colleagues (2014) and Webber et al. (2018) were unaffiliated with the Sri Lankan authorities and had the opportunity both to access the detention centers and to administer a variety of questionnaires to detainees with the intent to examine whether their participation in the program promoted a decrease in levels of support for armed struggle (Kruglanski et al., 2014) and of extreme ideology endorsement (Webber et al., 2018). In addition, both Kruglanski et al. (2014) and Webber et al. (2018) identified a control group -or, at least, what might be considered “the closest approximation” (Webber et al., 2018, p. 543). In particular, Kruglanski et al. (2014) identified a group that was not offered the rehabilitation programs, except for yoga and meditation; Webber et al. (2018) identified a group that was offered a minimal-treatment program. Furthermore, in both studies (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2018), the authors followed detainees over an extended period time.

In detail, Kruglanski et al. (2014) provided some preliminary findings pertaining to the success of the intervention. In doing so, they measured detainees’ degree of personal involvement with the LTTE organization, attitudes toward staff members of the rehabilitation program, and attitudes toward the armed fight both early in the incarceration period and 9 months later. Similarly, Webber et al. (2018) surveyed detainees across 1 year of rehabilitation and administered to them questionnaires assessing, among others, the extent to which they (and their families) were integrated with the LTTE organization (*embeddedness*), their perception of program benefits (*rehabilitation attitudes*), their feelings of insignificance (*loss of significance*), and their propensity to support LTTE’s ideologies and to legitimize the use of violence (*extremism*). Interestingly, Webber et al. (2018) in the same study compared levels of extreme ideology endorsement of a group of beneficiaries after their release from rehabilitation to those of members of the Tamil community who never were involved in the terrorist organization. In particular, all participants were asked to report on their feelings of insignificance, extremism, and positive attitudes toward the Sinhalese (i.e., the ethnic group



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with whom the LTTE organization was in conflict) and the Sri Lankan government, which was considered responsible for the disparities between the two groups and which opposed the LTTE members during the civil war. Former beneficiaries also reported on their attitudes toward the rehabilitation program, their degree of involvement in it per the number of programs attended, as well as on feelings of nostalgia for the LTTE organization. The results of all these contributions are described in detail next.

### *Findings from Evaluation Studies*

Qualitative evaluation studies offered unique insights on programs' effectiveness and on those mechanisms that might contribute to or be detrimental to the efficacy of the initiatives against offenders' radicalization, as well. In this regard, qualitative evaluations of the Dutch Reintegration Program highlighted that building positive relationships between staff and offenders was considered an essential aspect of the program (Schuurman & Bakker, 2015; van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018). However, the lack of objective indicators on how participants effectively progressed was an obstacle to the assessment of the initiative (van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018).

In terms of that program's success, during the first year of evaluation, as noted by Schuurman and Bakker (2015), it was hard to draw conclusions on the initial impact of this initiative given that none of the participants had yet concluded the reintegration process or had been fully deradicalized. In their additional evaluation, van der Heide and Schuurman (2018) reported that of the 189 clients supervised between 2012-2018, only 8 had terrorism-related recidivism, which seems to indicate that the program achieved the main goal to minimize recidivism among extremist and terrorist offenders. However, as the authors stressed, recidivism was tracked when offenders were still under supervision; thus, its results could only hint at the long-term impact of the program (van der Heide and Schuurman, 2018).

Similarly, qualitative studies from Cherney (2020) and Cherney (2018) provided both a close look at the challenges and various outcomes of the PRISM program based in Australia and at lessons learned during its implementation. In detail, findings from the preliminary evaluation showed that one of the main staff's difficulties was involving offenders in the initiative (Cherney, 2020). Indeed, as PRISM is a voluntary program, staff had to work hard

to gain offenders' consent and convince them about the benefits that participating in it might bring to their lives. The study also showed that treatment plans addressed various offenders' needs, including ideological (e.g., moderating religious views, promoting critical thinking), psychological (e.g., facing identity conflict), and social (preparing for release into the community) needs. In terms of effectiveness, some reports from participants seemed to suggest that the program was successful as offenders were helped to self-reflect, question their beliefs, and avoid extremist networks.

These positive findings were also confirmed in a follow-up evaluation by Cherney (2018) who compared participants' perceptions of the program's benefits and the staff's perceptions of participants' progress toward disengagement. In particular, offenders reported that involvement in the PRISM program helped them cope with their time in prison, reconsider their worldviews, resist radical groups' influence, and make plans for the future. PRISM staff confirmed that beneficiaries of the initiative progressed in religious knowledge and understanding, moved toward accepting the plurality of perspectives within their religion (Islam), dealt with anger constructively, and appeared motivated to pursue educational goals as well as to engage in work. To sum up, these two studies (Cherney, 2018, 2020) offered useful insights on the PRISM program, but the evaluation of the initiative seemed to be based on staff and participants' perceptions rather than on a valid measure of disengagement.

While qualitative studies provided interesting pieces of information on programs' implementation and development, quantitative and mixed-methods studies were mostly focused on how to effectively measure cognitive and behavioral changes of offenders to objectively prove the efficacy of the initiatives. In this regard, Cherney and Belton (2021) sought to verify whether there was a relationship between time of engagement in the PRISM program and participants' advances. As previously mentioned, in doing so, these scholars had selected behavioral and cognitive indicators of disengagement and observed and coded them within participants' case note data across different periods of engagement in the program. Briefly, they observed that the more the participants were involved in the PRISM program, the more they were likely to show signs of disengagement. Additional evidence that PRISM was beneficial to offenders was reported in another evaluation study (Cherney & Belton,

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2020), which coded changes in three participants' relevant cognitive and behavioral dimensions derived from Barrelle's (2015) model of extremist disengagement.

In summary, these two last pieces of evaluation of the PRISM program (Cherney & Belton, 2020; Cherney & Belton, 2021) moved beyond staff and participants' perceptions and headed toward more objective metrics, as they relied on quantitative coding of qualitative data. To note, however, the process of coding might be influenced by coders' subjectivity (Cherney & Belton, 2021). In addition, although these two studies tried to measure improvements and changes among PRISM participants, they were not able to demonstrate causation between engagement in PRISM and offenders' progress, as they did not use control groups or pre-and-post measures (Cherney & Belton, 2020; Cherney & Belton, 2021). Also, reported data came from a small number of participants, which hinders generalization. In any case, these two studies both offered valuable alternatives to overcome criticalities related to the process of evaluation of case-managed programs against radicalization (Cherney & Belton, 2021) and provided interesting insights on the effectiveness of the PRISM initiative based in Australia.

Finally, Kruglanski et al. (2014) and Webber et al. (2018) provided a quantitative assessment of the Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Program and, as anticipated, in doing so they had the opportunity to compare beneficiaries of the intervention with detainees from control groups. In detail, some preliminary findings from an evaluation of the program (Kruglanski et al., 2014) have shown that, over time, individuals in the rehabilitation group exhibited a more pronounced decline in support for armed struggle, whereas barely any change was found in the control group. Also, this study found that those beneficiaries who reported increased liking of the centers' personnel (e.g., perceived as fair) reduced their support for the armed struggle against the Sinhalese. The same mechanism was not detected among the control group, that is, changes in positive attitudes toward the staff were not related to changes in support for the armed fight. As argued by Kruglanski et al. (2014), this might mean that liking for personnel played a relevant role in detainees' deradicalization processes when in conjunction with offenders' participation in the program.

Webber et al. (2018) explored the effectiveness of the Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Program in two distinct studies. In Study 1 they found that those who fully benefitted from

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the rehabilitation program showed significantly lower levels of extremism across 1 year relative to those who received minimal treatment. Also, they found that beneficiaries with more positive attitudes toward rehabilitation exhibited lower levels of self-insignificance, which resulted in lower extremism at the final assessment. Thus, it seems that addressing insignificance is one potential underlying mechanism explaining reduction in extremism.

In Study 2, Webber et al. (2018) ascertained the long-term impact of the program. Specifically, they found that post-rehabilitation LTTE members showed significantly less extremism and more positive attitudes toward the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan authorities than Tamil community members who never belonged to the LTTE organization. Additionally, they demonstrated that former beneficiaries with more positive recollections of rehabilitation reported lower levels of extremism and nostalgia for LTTE, as well as increased positivity toward the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan government both directly and indirectly by means of lower insignificance, even after they had graduated from the rehabilitation initiative. Finally, Webber and colleagues (2018) showed that former beneficiaries who had been involved in a greater number of programs during their rehabilitation exhibited a greater reduction in levels of insignificance that was related to lesser extremism and nostalgia as well as to greater positivity toward the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan government, even after their return to their communities. Interestingly, the number of programs attended was found to be directly associated with reduced extremism regardless of the mediating role of feelings of insignificance.

Briefly, Kruglanski et al. (2014) and Webber et al. (2018) were able to prove the efficacy of the Sri Lankan program among hundreds of detainees by comparing rehabilitation and control groups. In addition, Webber et al. (2018) highlighted the underlying psychological mechanisms (e.g., personal significance) by which this program changed former extremists' worldviews and attitudes. Despite this, some caveats should be made. First, it remains unclear which segment of the intervention was effective or more effective relative to others. Second, as the authors highlighted (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2018), the political and social context of the rehabilitation program might have impacted the success of the initiative. Indeed, the LTTE organization had already been defeated at the time of rehabilitation and such a circumstance might have both reduced its appeal to detained

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members and made participants more prone to embrace new perspectives and more receptive to the program's messages and proposals.

## Discussion

Correctional institutions have often been regarded as fertile environments for radicalization, but they are also places where such a phenomenon might be buffered (RAN, 2016). Several efforts have been made across European and by international corrective services to promote offenders' deradicalization, disengagement, and reintegration into society (Neumann, 2010; RAN, 2019; Ronco et al., 2019; Speckhard, 2011; Vidino & Clifford, 2019). However, little is still known about their effectiveness and impact (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017). In light of this, in the current work we aimed at recapitulating the state of the art of the literature that has evaluated the effectiveness of programs aimed at preventing and countering radicalization in correctional systems. Although this literature review is close in scope with other evidence syntheses on deradicalization and disengagement programs performed inside correctional institutions (e.g., prisons, probation services, and rehabilitation centers), such as the work by Axelsson and colleagues (2023), the current contribution complements these previous findings by providing a focus on methodologies, techniques, and instruments adopted to assess the effectiveness of such types of intervention.

In particular, eight studies were scoped that described initiatives that prevalently addressed religious extremism, nationalist/separatist extremism, and White supremacy. Four studies were qualitative, two mixed methods (since they converted qualitative into quantitative data), and two quantitative, which surveyed offenders by means of self-reported questionnaires. A total of three initiatives were presented: one implemented in Europe (in the Netherlands), one in Australia, and one in Sri Lanka.

In general, reports of the evaluations seemed to reveal that these interventions promoted offenders' deradicalization and disengagement processes. Yet, several questions remain open, such as those relating to which type of programs worked best, and which intervention components contributed the most to their successes. Also, from a psychological perspective, the underlying psycho-social mechanisms by which these programs facilitated

positive changes among already radicalized and/or at-risk of radicalization offenders seemed to be underexplored. That said, a closer look at results might both help determine criticalities related to the process of evaluation and understand what has been done so far and what is yet to do in the field of evaluation of programs combating radicalization inside correctional institutions.

First, one of the main themes that emerged across the scoped studies concerned whether to focus on deradicalization or disengagement when countering violent extremism and radicalization among offenders (Schuurman & Bakker, 2015; Webber et al., 2018). Several lines of research stressed the differences between the two phenomena, with deradicalization promoting cognitive versus disengagement promoting behavioral transformations (Horgan, 2008). Interestingly, some reviewed studies reported on deradicalization (e.g., Webber et al., 2018), whereas others on cognitive and behavioral indicators of disengagement (e.g., Cherney & Belton, 2020, 2021). Thus, it is still unclear whether abandoning ideologies and/or abstaining from violent actions might be seen as unique or joint outcomes of rehabilitation programs. In any case, it should be borne in mind that addressing ideological and practical features of radicalization has been deemed useful in promoting offenders' reintegration (Schuurman & Bakker, 2015).

Second, characterizing this research is a lack of standardized measures of deradicalization and disengagement. On the basis of the reviewed studies, indeed, it seemed that there is no agreement on how to assess offenders' cognitive or behavioral changes (Cherney & Belton, 2021). As to this, for instance, Webber et al. (2018) administered tailored items ascertaining beneficiaries' support for the ideological principles of the LTTE organization to detect their extremism, whereas Cherney and Belton (2020, 2021) derived indicators of cognitive and behavioral changes from the literature (e.g., the theoretical model of extremist disengagement; Barrelle et al., 2015). In sum, such a picture calls for a consensual vision of what lives at the core of these two phenomena and stresses the need to validate rigorous measures. What is more, having valid, reliable, and common instruments for assessing deradicalization and disengagement might allow for a systematic comparison of different initiatives (Williams & Kleinman, 2014).



Third, we noticed that only a few studies had a sound psychological theoretical framework within which the evaluation was carried out (Cherney & Belton, 2020; Webber et al., 2018). In particular, Webber et al. (2018) - by adopting *the quest for significance* framework (Kruglanski et al., 2009) - were able to identify a specific psychological mechanism that undergirded the Sri Lankan rehabilitation initiative and made this action fruitful. It seemed that this program provided offenders with sources of personal significance that prevented them from turning to extreme ideologies. Ultimately, having in mind sound theories of radicalization might guide the evaluation process itself, as such theories might help explicitly connect program activities with expected outcomes (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015).

Fourth, another topic that arose from the scoped publications concerned the way the success of an intervention should be conceptualized. In some cases, low recidivism rates were seen as markers of success (e.g., van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018), but these statistics might be imprecise (Renard, 2020). In addition, recidivism rates do not seem to reflect benefits derived from participating in a rehabilitation program, that is they do not tell anything about what skills and abilities the program improved among beneficiaries. Several indicators, such as developing critical thinking, nurturing a balanced identity, and having positive social connections have been defined as indicators of progress toward deradicalization and disengagement and, thus, as signals of the effectiveness and success of a program (Cherney & Belton, 2020, 2021; Marsden, 2015). Yet, what is missing are psychometrically validated tools to assess psychosocial factors that might help ascertain the key cognitive and behavioral transformations among fully and potential radical offenders.

In summary, when approaching the field of preventing and countering radicalization programs inside correctional institutions one is confronted with several questions and criticalities, such as those concerning what a program should focus on, the lack of agreement on how to univocally define and measure success, and the identification of uniform indicators of deradicalization and disengagement. Despite this, it is worth noting that our scoping review has identified some key elements that make programs effective, in line with other evidence syntheses (e.g., Axelsson et al., 2023). For instance, qualitative studies (e.g., Cherney, 2018, 2020; van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018) highlighted that a prerequisite to the success of an intervention is the establishment of positive relationships between beneficiaries and the staff



of the program. Similarly, Kruglanski et al.'s (2014) quantitative assessment of the Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Program found that increased liking of staff played a role in detainees' reduction of support for the armed fight. Also, it seems that the greater the engagement in a given initiative, the greater is the likelihood that participants show signs of positive changes (Cherney & Belton, 2021; Webber et al., 2018).

### *Implications*

The present scoping review has implications for both research and practice. Concerning research, works analyzed in this synthesis underlined that evaluation studies of programs against radicalization in prison environments need to triangulate qualitative (e.g., client case notes, interviews with staff and clients, focus groups, observations) and quantitative sources of data, including participants' self-reports on attitudes toward rehabilitation and on psychological factors implicated in deradicalization and disengagement processes. Indeed, combining multiple data sources with adopting different methods and techniques might offer a more objective view of programs' development and impact (Costa et al., 2021). Additionally, future evaluation studies should refer to theoretical models of radicalization, which might assist scholars in formulating hypotheses, identifying possible relations among program activities and outcomes, and unveiling mechanisms behind such interventions (e.g., Webber et al., 2018).

As to practical implications, the scoped studies offered important pieces of information that might be useful for future program design, implementation, and evaluation. Regarding design and implementation, a lot of effort should be put into winning offenders' trust, as this has been shown to be a prerequisite for program success (Cherney, 2020).

Additionally, preventing and countering violent extremism programs should be guided by relevant theories of radicalization, as they might help staff define intervention goals, identify individuals' needs, and provide suitable activities leading participants to reconsider their ideologies and break up with violent groups. For instance, as some studies (e.g., Webber et al., 2018) suggested that the quest for personal significance is an important motivational factor pushing individuals to radicalize, programs against radicalization inside correctional

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institutions should provide inmates with sources of meaning and purpose (e.g., through involvement in education) that keep them away from radical worldviews and organizations.

However, other mechanisms might be at stake in the radicalization process, such as the fulfilment of social needs, the tendency to perceive the world in terms of *us versus them*, and the search for personal and social identity (Cherney & Belton, 2020, 2021). Also salient are moral disengagement mechanisms, feelings of frustration, and prejudices (Sklad & Park, 2017). Consequently, programs should work to provide beneficiaries with the necessary cognitive and social resources to help them create new visions for themselves and other groups, develop positive norms and values, and resist the influence of violent/terrorist associations (Jugl et al., 2021). Concerning evaluation, scholars should develop more solid and rigorous methodologies and techniques that encompass the use of control groups (whenever possible), longitudinal study designs, and follow-up procedures to detect the enduring effects of interventions.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Shortcomings related to the research criteria adopted to carry out this synthesis of the literature should be considered. Indeed, querying only three databases (Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycInfo) and including only studies eventually published in English, Italian, or French might have eliminated valuable works in other languages. Thus, future scoping reviews should search other databases and include studies written in different languages. Similarly, although we were interested in reporting findings from accredited and scientific literature, we are aware that having not explored the grey literature might have excluded relevant studies (Axelsson et al., 2023; McBride et al., 2022).

The limits of the scoped studies should be accounted for, too. To begin with, in line with other reviews on the evaluation of deradicalization initiatives (e.g., Feddes & Gallucci, 2015), we found that the effects of programs were reported mostly at individual rather than group levels (e.g., Cherney & Belton, 2020, 2021). This might hinder the chance to understand whether an intervention might be beneficial to a broader population of radical inmates and offenders. Therefore, future studies should move beyond the evaluation of single cases and include group assessments that can provide more generalizable data.

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Additionally, only a few studies clearly used a longitudinal design, follow-ups, and comparison groups. In light of this, future works should opt to create the necessary conditions to adopt these methods. Indeed, such techniques will help better ascertain causation in that they might permit one to affirm that cognitive and behavioral changes in extremist individuals are attributed to a specific intervention. Third, except for a few works (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2018), the scoped studies did not report on mediating variables that might account for beneficiaries' desistance from extreme ideologies and groups or on moderating factors conditioning the success of a program. As these variables might shed light on the underlying mechanisms behind a given initiative that promote change in attitudes and behaviors among radical offenders, research exploring their role is strongly encouraged.

Despite these limitations, the current scoping review synthesized findings from qualitative studies that explored the experiences of program staff, relevant stakeholders, and beneficiaries involved in preventing and countering radicalization programs inside correctional systems. Notwithstanding a possible social-desirability bias (Costa et al., 2021), these results might offer interesting insights and suggestions to those who run programs against radicalization among offenders and detainees.

## Conclusion

As reported in other publications synthesizing the literature on deradicalization and disengagement programs (e.g., Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; McBride et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2021; Pistone et al., 2019), this scoping review confirmed that there is a lack of standardized methodologies and common indicators to assess the success of actions aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization. In practical terms, such a situation hinders the possibility to compare programs and establish what worked best and which factors made them effective. Particularly, at the moment, the field of research regarding the evaluation of initiatives against radicalization inside correctional systems appears to be confronted with several difficulties. However, the interventions described in this review seemed to be a promising way to deal with radical offenders beyond just using security-

minded approaches to prevent and counter radicalization inside correctional institutions. Consequently, researchers are encouraged to both find more rigorous ways to evaluate the efficacy of these programs and offer sound evidence that might guide future practices and interventions.

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