

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND
EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS

INTRODUCTORY GUIDE: COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

An introductory guide to Countering Violent Extremism initiatives, setting out the types of interventions and methods they use.

15 MINUTE READ

GENERAL



“ Countering Violent Extremism initiatives aim to strengthen the resilience of individuals and communities to the appeal of radicalisers and extremism ”

KEY POINTS

- Countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives are programmes or policies designed to prevent people from engaging in ideologically motivated violence.
- CVE programmes can be targeted at different stages: primary interventions to prevent the emergence of radicalisation within broad communities; secondary interventions targeting those ‘at risk’ of being radicalised; and tertiary interventions against those already engaged in violent extremism (including deradicalisation, disengagement, and reintegration programmes).
- A wide range of CVE methods are used, and their choice is based on assumptions about the drivers of radicalisation, and (ideally) a strong ‘Theory of Change’ about why a particular intervention will lead to the desired outcome.
- CVE programmes can be delivered by states, by civil society organisations, or by both in collaboration.
- CVE remains a relatively new domain, and there are few robust evaluations of CVE interventions, making it difficult to determine their effectiveness. Comparatively little is known about what works and why. However, successful programmes appear to share the following features:
 1. Strong evidence base supporting programme design and delivery
 2. Collaboration between community organisations and statutory agencies
 3. Ongoing evaluation and review

WHAT IS COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Initiatives to counter violent extremism (CVE) are programmes or policies designed to prevent people engaging in ideologically motivated violence, or to support the disengagement of those already so engaged. CVE interventions operate across individual, group, and societal levels and include projects designed to further the disengagement of those involved in militant networks, educational initiatives intended to develop critical thinking and religious literacy, and community cohesion programmes aimed at improving relations between identity groups.

CVE is a relatively new policy area. Although the importance of prevention and reintegration have long been recognised by policymakers and practitioners, until recently the emphasis has been on coercive forms of counter-terrorism (e.g. arrests) primarily designed to disrupt terrorist plots.

As well as initiatives developed at national and local levels, CVE is now an increasingly prominent feature of the work of international organisations such as the United Nations.

The breadth of CVE raises several issues. International organisations, nation states, and their agencies interpret CVE in different ways, and many lack a clear definition. This can make it difficult to coordinate and assess the development and delivery of interventions.

More fundamentally, the challenges associated with identifying the complex drivers believed to lead to involvement in extremism mean there is much to learn about when and why CVE interventions are effective.



DEFINITIONS OF CVE DIFFER IN SCALE AND EMPHASIS

‘CVE encompasses programmes and policies intended both to prevent individuals and groups from radicalizing and mobilizing to commit violence and to disengage individuals and groups who are planning to commit, or who have already engaged in extremist violence.’

United States, National Counter Terrorism Centre, 2014

‘CVE is the banner used to describe efforts of Australian governments to prevent processes of radicalisation leading to violent extremism, including terrorism, and where possible to help individuals disengage from a preparedness to support or commit acts of violence to achieve political, social or ideological ends.’

Australian Government, 2015

‘CVE constitutes all actions that strengthen the resilience of individuals and communities to the appeal of radicalisers and extremism.’

European Commission, 2015

WHERE ARE CVE PROGRAMMES TARGETED?

The broad landscape of CVE initiatives can be usefully categorised by the stage at which they intervene. Primary interventions are designed to increase awareness of the risks of violent extremism and prevent the emergence of factors that may drive radicalisation.



DEFINITION

Radicalisation is often seen as the process by which a person comes to hold extremist ideologies. There are other definitions, for example the UK Government states that it '*refers to the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism.*'

Deradicalisation is a term commonly used to describe attitudinal and ideological change associated with a reduced commitment to extremism.

Disengagement refers to behavioural change connected with the move away from extremism.

Secondary interventions are group and individual level programmes targeting those 'at risk' of being radicalised.

Tertiary interventions focus on those already engaged in violent extremism to prevent ongoing involvement, and include de-radicalisation, disengagement, and reintegration programmes.

KEY POINTS

- Governments need to take account of local needs in order to determine the right balance between different forms of interventions.
- Programme designers must identify appropriate partners to deliver interventions, building in robust procedures for multi-agency working where appropriate.
- Evaluation should be included in programme design to ensure that resources are spent effectively and knowledge about best practice is developed and shared.

PRIMARY PREVENTION

- Broadest scope - society as a whole
- Aim to tackle 'root causes' of violent extremism
- Prevent radicalisation *indirectly*

SECONDARY PREVENTION

- Limited scope - those 'at-risk'
- Aim to tackle process of radicalisation
- Prevent radicalisation *directly*

TERTIARY PREVENTION

- Narrow scope - those already engaged
- Aim is deradicalisation or disengagement
- Prevent continued involvement *directly*

WHAT METHODS DO CVE INTERVENTIONS USE?

CVE interventions encompass a wide range of methods shaped by different assumptions about what causes violent extremism. There is no 'terrorist profile', and the diverse journeys people take into militancy make identifying a common pathway difficult.

It is more useful to think about the process of radicalisation as a complex interaction between factors that operate at different levels (structural, group, and individual), and to interpret these in the context of enabling factors such as the influence of extremist recruiters and terrorist propaganda, and the absence of protective factors, such as a capable guardian or attractive alternative activities.

Each CVE programme targets a different combination of factors assumed to shape involvement in

extremism. Evaluations of such programmes seek to understand the impact of the intervention on addressing or mitigating these factors.

Because a unified framework of outcomes has yet to be developed, the strongest CVE projects clearly specify how aims, methods, and outcomes relate to one another in their particular case.

Underpinning the relationship between programme aims and outcomes are assumptions about how and why an intervention is supposed to work.

This is often referred to as the programme's Theory of Change (ToC). The ToC describes how and why an intervention is supposed to impact specific drivers of radicalisation in ways that support positive outcomes.

CAUSE AND INTERVENTION

CAUSE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM	TYPE OF INTERVENTION
STRUCTURAL	
Political: repression, political exclusion, geo-political events	Citizenship & democracy projects Post-conflict reconciliation
Cultural: discrimination, stigmatisation, identity conflict	Community cohesion Education and inter-faith projects
Socio-economic: economic deprivation, inequality	Poverty alleviation Training & employment support
SOCIAL/GROUP	
Group belonging, search for identity, perceived threat to identity group	Sports & recreational projects Youth empowerment schemes
INDIVIDUAL	
Adventure, revenge, status, material incentives, extremist ideology	Mentoring & counselling Religious literacy
ENABLING	
Recruiters, social networks linked to extremist groups	Referral and information services Counter-narrative initiatives

Mapping out an intervention’s ToC makes it possible to evaluate how well the evidence supports the assumptions that shape the programme. It can also help in programme development and in identifying appropriate metrics.

KEY POINTS

- Clearly explaining the assumptions that inform the relationships between aims, methods, and outcomes is an important part of programme design.

- It is best practice to develop a Theory of Change that supports intervention development, delivery, and evaluation.
- CVE interventions can be informed by academic research, information about the local context, and practice-based knowledge. Together, this information can be used to derive valid evaluation metrics and understand programme outcomes.

WHO DELIVERS INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES?

The rapid expansion of CVE has seen an increasing range of actors from the private, public, and third sector engage with the field. Programmes are often categorised as *top-down* or *bottom-up*, the former delivered or directed by governments, the latter emerging from civil society. Although the majority of funding comes from governments, collaborative approaches are most common.

KEY POINTS

- Governments have an important role to play in financing and supporting community based providers.

- Credibility and legitimacy are key to overcoming potential distrust caused by government involvement.
- It can be necessary to build capacity amongst those deemed most credible.
- It is important to consider how best to mitigate the potential risks of government-civil society collaborations.
- Collaboration between community groups and statutory organisations is a common feature of effective CVE interventions.



ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN DELIVERING CVE INTERVENTIONS

GOVERNMENT	CIVIL SOCIETY	CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Central government departments Local authorities Social services	Faith organisations or institutions Community and youth groups NGOs and charities Former combatants Former prisoners	Law enforcement Intelligence agencies Prison and probation services
PERSONAL NETWORKS		INTERNATIONAL
Family Friends Community members		International organisations (e.g., UN, EU) International networks (e.g., Hedayah)

DO CVE INTERVENTIONS WORK?

Despite overlaps with other areas of work, CVE remains a relatively new domain, and comparatively little is known about what works and why. Efforts to understand CVE's impact face three broader challenges:

- Because the causes of violent extremism are complex, it is difficult to determine which combination of factors, if targeted, is likely to produce positive outcomes.
- Multiple influences shape human behaviour making it difficult to identify the specific impact a programme had on why someone did not go on to engage in violent extremism.
- Many programmes do not make their evaluations publicly available and many more do not carry out evaluations at all, limiting learning and the development of best practice.

Despite this, there is modest evidence that interventions can have a positive impact on CVE-relevant issues. The most effective share several features:

- **Strong evidence base supporting programme design and delivery:** Programmes are most robust when building on existing knowledge to justify the relationship between aims, methods, and outcomes. Drawing on parallel areas can strengthen the uneven evidence on violent extremism:
 1. **Academic research** in fields such as criminology, psychology, or peace studies
 2. **Experienced practitioners** hold important practice-based knowledge
 3. **Community leaders and members** have valuable understanding of local dynamics.
 4. **International organisations** play an important role in developing networks and consolidating expertise

- **Collaboration between community organisations and statutory agencies:** CVE interventions demand multiple types of expertise and different kinds of resources. These are rarely found in individual organisations making cooperation between multiple actors important. Collaborations need to demonstrate credibility and foster trust.
- **Ongoing evaluation and review:** CVE interventions are delivered in a dynamic environment, they also have the potential to produce unintended, negative consequences. Programmes should ensure they are responsive to emerging issues that may influence their work, such as international events and changes in local attitudes towards CVE.



QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN COMMISSIONING CVE PROGRAMMES

1. Does the intervention include a Theory of Change that clearly links evidence to aims, methods, and outcomes?
2. Do delivery agents have legitimacy with the target audience, reach, and resources?
3. Does the programme have a robust evaluation strategy?
4. Are output and outcome measures clear and realistic?
5. Does the programme take account of local dynamics?
6. Are potential unintended consequences assessed?
7. Is there an appropriate mix of partners to support programme delivery?
8. Does the programme contribute to an appropriate balance between primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions?

READ MORE

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