



# Addressing Violent Extremism in Prisons and Probation

## Principles for Effective Programs and Interventions

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### INTRODUCTION

There is considerable international interest in programs that seek to rehabilitate and reintegrate violent extremist offenders (VEOs) and prevent prisoners from becoming radicalized.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of reasons for this interest, including the high social and political impact of terrorism, ongoing concerns about prisons and prisoners being especially vulnerable to radicalization to violent extremism, accounts of VEOs who initially became interested in extremism while in prison, and the increasing numbers of incarcerated VEOs in certain states, many of whom will at some point be released into wider society. Identifying and designing so-called deradicalization or disengagement

programs—or perhaps more appropriately risk-reduction programs<sup>2</sup>—that are proven to be impactful and understanding why remains a considerable challenge.<sup>3</sup> In light of these challenges, finding alternative ways to identify and establish effective programs (or components of programs) is required.

Attention has been given to how the efficacy of such programs can be evaluated more robustly, such as by using measures of recidivism or proxy measures indicative of desistance.<sup>4</sup> However, one aspect of this debate that has received less attention is the extent to which research and knowledge about programs proven to prevent different types of offenders from

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Global Counterterrorism Forum, *Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders*, 2012, <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/Rome%20Memorandum%20-%20ENG.pdf?ver=2016-03-29-134610-213>; European Commission Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Dealing With Radicalisation in a Prison and Probation Context*, RAN P&P—practitioners working paper, 2015, [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-news/docs/ran\\_p\\_and\\_p\\_practitioners\\_working\\_paper\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-news/docs/ran_p_and_p_practitioners_working_paper_en.pdf); Peter Neumann, *Prisons and Terrorism Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation in 15 Countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2010, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> John Horgan, “Fully Operational? The Ongoing Challenges of Terrorist Risk Reduction Programs,” *E-International Relations*, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/07/29/fully-operational-the-ongoing-challenges-of-terrorist-risk-reduction-programs/>.

<sup>3</sup> See for example John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of Deradicalization Programs,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (2010): 267–291; Horgan, “Fully Operational?”

<sup>4</sup> See for example Horgan and Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists.”

reoffending is also applicable to VEOs.<sup>5</sup> So-called what-works principles underlying programs to prevent other forms of offending behavior have been established in the criminological and forensic psychological literature over recent decades.<sup>6</sup> The key what-works principles are risk, need, and responsivity. In summary, programs should (1) target those who are deemed of higher risk of reoffending and of committing serious harm (risk principle), (2) target factors that directly contribute to offending (need principle), and (3) be delivered in a way and style that maximizes learning for individuals (responsivity principle). Programs that are in accord with all three principles have been found to be more effective than those that do not.<sup>7</sup>

Consideration of similar principles for programs aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has been previously advocated but seemingly not further developed.<sup>8</sup> This is possibly because such programs have generally been developed by those who are less familiar with research and approaches typically adopted in many Western correctional services (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia) or who may perceive P/CVE programs as requiring entirely distinct approaches. Given that research and knowledge about how to intervene to prevent other types of offending (or manage risk of offending) is considerable, it is surprising that this research and knowledge has been given relatively little consideration regarding lessons that can be learned to prevent violent extremism. As both John Horgan and Max Taylor have acknowledged, learning from both forensic psychology and programs to prevent and

manage other forms of offending behavior may be particularly valuable in helping us better understand and manage terrorist behavior.<sup>9</sup>

This policy brief focuses on a particular program, the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII), which was specifically designed to prevent extremist offenders from reoffending and was based on general what-works principles.<sup>10</sup> It centers on the opinions, reflections, and experiences of the author, who designed, developed, and implemented this intervention across the Prison and Probation Services of England and Wales. It therefore provides a unique perspective on the issues raised and specifically outlines: (1) insight into the apparent generalizability and utility of what-works principles for P/CVE programs, (2) insight into specific program components or issues that may contribute to or undermine efficacy, and (3) suggested what-works principles to specifically inform effective P/CVE programs. The main intention is to provide a set of transparent working principles to improve the design and delivery of programs that can hopefully be examined and tested over time to help refine our knowledge and understanding. Without such principles, our ability to know and understand with confidence which programs work, for whom, why, when, how, and under what circumstances will continue to remain uncertain and unknown.

## BACKGROUND

Whether programs to reduce the risk of violent extremist offending are effective continues to be the

<sup>5</sup> Horgan, “Fully Operational?”

<sup>6</sup> See for example Don Andrews and James Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 5th ed. (New Providence, NJ: LexisNexis, 2010), 45–77; James McGuire, “‘What Works’ to Reduce Re-Offending 18 Years on,” in Leam Craig, Louise Dixon, and Theresa Gannon, eds., *What Works in Offender Rehabilitation: An Evidence-Based Approach to Assessment and Treatment* (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 20–49.

<sup>7</sup> Andrews and Bonta, *Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 45–77.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Mullins, “Rehabilitation of Extremist Terrorists: Learning From Criminology,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 3, no. 3 (2010): 162–193.

<sup>9</sup> John Horgan and Max Taylor, “Disengagement, De-radicalization, and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research,” in Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The Healthy Identity Intervention is a psychologically informed program that primarily seeks to reduce or manage the risk that offenders may present in committing extremist offenses (including extremist violence) in custody and in the community. This focus on reducing and managing is consistent with the purpose of equivalent programs used with other offender groups. To achieve this, the intervention specifically focuses on the twin goals of reducing an individual’s preparedness to offend on behalf of an extremist group, cause, or ideology and changing the individual’s relationship with an extremist group, cause, or ideology (especially those aspects that contribute to harm). Addressing and working with identity issues is central to the intervention. The HII incorporates components that are both similar to and distinct from components in programs that are used to prevent other types of offending. To encourage consistent and effective delivery, the program uses manuals that outline the aims, delivery principles, underlying theory, suggested session plans, management processes, etc. It is delivered by psychologists and probation officers who tailor the intervention’s content to the specific assessed risks, needs, strengths, and circumstances of each participant. Whether the program is deemed successful is based on the extent to which the risk has changed or protective factors are identified for each individual. Examples of areas the intervention focuses on include addressing personal identity issues, facilitating disillusionment with involvement, managing feelings associated with identification and group conflict, and challenging the legitimacy of violence to achieve political and social change.

topic of much debate in the literature.<sup>11</sup> One of the key issues is our ability to evaluate and measure the impact of programs on reoffending (as opposed to other factors or circumstances) and to do so with a robust level of confidence, ideally based on empirical and statistical evidence.<sup>12</sup> Although appropriate attention is being focused on how more-robust outcome evaluations can be established in this field, significant questions remain regarding the design and implementation of effective programs, such as: How should programs be designed, developed, and delivered in order to be effective? What have we learned about what makes programs effective to prevent other forms of offending behavior, and how can we apply this learning to programs to prevent violent extremist offending? What unique components or features may be significant for programs with extremist offenders that may not be significant for programs with other offenders? And what emerging—albeit tentative—principles can be identified to shape the evolution of these specific programs? It is these questions that this policy brief explores in more detail.

The HII, developed by the National Offender Management Service in England and Wales, is structured largely in accordance with the what-works literature and its associated principles.<sup>13</sup> This intervention is primarily used on a one-to-one basis with convicted VEOs to prevent recidivism, although it has also been used with offenders for whom there are significant concerns regarding their interest and involvement in extremist groups, causes, or ideologies.<sup>14</sup> The intervention has been delivered over a number of years in the prison and probation services of England and Wales with those who have committed extremist offenses affiliated with a variety of groups, causes, and ideologies (e.g., the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, al-Qaida, the Far Right, the Kurdistan Workers Party). The underlying theory, content, structure, and delivery mechanisms for this intervention are outlined in detail elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> It is

difficult to locate other programs in this field that have been explicitly designed along these principles.

## WHAT WORKS: EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS TO PREVENT REOFFENDING

It has been argued that although aspects of programs used with VEOs may differ from those used with other offenders, the underlying principles—or similar ones—behind programs that have proved successful in reducing recidivism among other offenders are likely to still apply and should be used as the basis for such programs.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the three key what-works principles previously outlined, other variables associated with effective programs have been identified under the umbrella of organizational principles within the field of corrections. These cover the role that factors such as intervention settings, staffing, and management can play in contributing to effective programs, notably in maintaining intervention integrity (i.e., that they are delivered how they were designed and intended to be delivered). Many correctional services (particularly in Europe, North America, and Australia) implement programs based on these principles with the associated infrastructure to monitor, quality assure, and evaluate delivery.<sup>17</sup>

Outlined below are the author's reflections, observations, and opinions on how significant and appropriate each of the what-works principles appears to be for effectively intervening to prevent extremist offending. There are also further insights into how these principles may need to be nuanced in this field and suggestions for additional distinct components and principles for effective programs aimed at VEOs. The author acknowledges that personal opinions and experiences clearly have their limitations. Therefore, he does not claim that these suggested principles are inherently true, proven, or necessary for effective programs in this field.

<sup>11</sup> Dianne van Hemert, Helma van de Berg, Tony van Vliet, Maaïke Roelofs, and Mirjam Huis in't Veld, *Synthesis Report on the State-of-the-Art in Evaluating the Effectiveness of Counter-Violent Extremism Interventions*, Impact Europe, 2014, <http://impaceteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/D2.2-Synthesis-Report.pdf>; Allard Feddes and Marcello Gallucci, "A Literature Review on Methodology Used in Evaluating Effects of Preventative De-Radicalisation Interventions," *Journal for Deradicalization* 5 (Winter 2015): 1–27.

<sup>12</sup> Horgan and Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists."

<sup>13</sup> See Christopher Dean, "The Healthy Identity Intervention: The UK's Development of a Psychologically Informed Intervention to Address Extremist Offending," in Andrew Silke, ed., *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> The term *extremist offending*, rather than *violent extremist offending*, acknowledges that not all extremist offenses are inherently violent in nature, for example, illegal occupation of buildings or criminal damage to influence social or political actions. However, most extremist offenses either directly or indirectly contribute to the commission of violence, including those that involve financing terrorist activities or the distribution of publications that incite terrorist activities.

<sup>15</sup> See Dean, "Healthy Identity Intervention."

<sup>16</sup> See for example Feddes and Gallucci, "Literature Review," and Mullins, "Rehabilitation of Extremist Terrorists."

<sup>17</sup> See for example Devon Polaschek "An Appraisal of the Risk, Need and Responsivity Model of Offender Rehabilitation and its application in Correctional Treatment," *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 17 (2012): 1–17; McGuire, "What Works."

### 1. Risk Principle: Matching Intervention Intensity to an Individual's Level of Risk

In the author's experience, the intensity of an intervention should be calibrated to the risk posed by the individual offender. Intensity in this context relates to the amount of program sessions completed and how personally challenging or demanding this work is. Clearly a significant challenge to this principle, in this field, is the absence of data on how effectively existing assessments accurately measure risk of extremist reoffending. This arguably limits the extent to which we can match intervention intensity with individual risk. However, experience suggests this may be appropriately achieved through assessing an individual's past and current levels of engagement and identification with an extremist group, cause, or ideology, as well as his or her willingness to support or commit harm on its behalf (dimensions that are also deemed to bear on risk).<sup>18</sup> Various issues may arise if intervention intensity is not matched appropriately to these dimensions.

A danger of providing programs that are too intensive for an individual who may have only been peripherally or opportunistically involved (and therefore arguably poses a lower risk) is that the person's sense of having an extremist identity can actually be developed and/or reinforced rather than reduced. This may similarly apply to those who may have already made significant steps to disengage or indeed disidentify.<sup>19</sup> A danger of providing programs that are less intensive in the face of a stronger commitment or risk is that they are insufficient to have a meaningful impact on disengagement or desistance.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, for those

individuals who are criminally diverse, providing programs that are only focused on addressing their extremist offending are unlikely to be sufficient to target all their risks and needs and reduce their likelihood of committing future offenses. Based on the author's experience, designing and delivering programs that can accommodate differences between an individual's engagement and willingness to offend and allow flexibility in the amount, type, and focus of intervention content delivered can help to ensure appropriate intervention intensity.

Suggested principles:

- The intensity of intervention work delivered should reflect an individual's past and current engagement (or disengagement) with a violent extremist group, cause, or ideology, the individual's willingness to offend on its behalf, and the individual's capability to offend (including his or her criminal networks).
- Programs should be designed to accommodate flexibility in the type, amount, frequency, and intensity of content delivered.

### 2. Need Principle: Robust Assessment and Targeting Criminogenic Needs

To effectively reduce the risk of recidivism, it is also necessary to address the circumstances that are common contributors to reoffending. Here, robust assessment plays an important role in identifying appropriate programs; tailoring programs to an individual's specific risks, needs, and circumstances; helping to identify the appropriate intensity and

<sup>18</sup> See for example Monica Lloyd and Christopher Dean, "The Development of Structured Guidelines for Assessing Risk in Extremist Offenders," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, no. 1 (March 2015), 40–52.

<sup>19</sup> The concept of identification (as distinct from engagement) acknowledges that the relationships individuals can have with violent extremist groups, causes, or ideologies vary significantly, ranging from superficial or peripheral engagement to significant and deeply personal identification. Disidentification refers to the process by which people's involvement or affiliation with a group, cause, or ideology becomes less or no longer important to their sense of self, how they define themselves, and how they live their daily lives. Disidentification can be thought of as a particular form of disengagement.

<sup>20</sup> The HII is specifically not referred to as a "deradicalization" or "disengagement" program because of concerns around the helpfulness of such labels. Such labels are not applied to define programs for other types of offender (typically referred to as offending behavior programs). The primary goal of HII is to facilitate and support desistance, which may require changes to or management of personal identity, thinking (including offense-supportive beliefs and attitudes), behavior, and relationships. This is entirely consistent with programs that seek to facilitate desistance from other forms of offending behavior. Addressing beliefs, attitudes, or ways of thinking that can contribute, directly or indirectly, to offending behavior is a common focus for other offending behavior programs and commensurate with what can be termed deradicalization approaches. It is acknowledged, however, that seeking to change an individual's relationship (engagement) with a particular group, cause, or ideology is considered more significant to facilitate desistance from violent extremist offending than for other types of offending behavior (with the possible exception of gang-related offending). *Disengagement* is, therefore, seen as both a useful term and goal as it relates to specific changes to an individual's relationship with a violent extremist group, cause, or ideology that may directly or indirectly facilitate desistance. Disengagement is not considered necessary for desistance to occur, especially temporarily (so-called primary desistance). However, it is less clear whether disengagement may be required for prolonged or lifelong (secondary) desistance, which, among other things, may require identity change. For more information, see Fergus McNeil, "A Desistance Paradigm for Offender Management," *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 6, no. 1 (2005): 39–62.

duration of intervention work; and monitoring an individual's progress and change (i.e., measuring intervention efficacy). Assessors can also use this process to motivate intervention participation, build trust, and initiate or consolidate doubts about previous or current interest or involvement in violent extremist groups, causes, or ideas. Robust assessment appears to help participants understand the relevance of particular sessions or issues covered in intervention work to their own particular lives and circumstances, which can reduce unnecessary resistance or provocation relating to topics addressed during programs. It can also provide the opportunity for agencies to communicate that they are interested in understanding individual stories and accounts, rather than communicating they perceive VEOs as one homogenous group that will be managed as such. This can have an impact on how individuals engage with the authorities, participate in programs, and perceive certain groups in stereotypical and homogenized ways. Assessments that accommodate dynamic (changeable) risk and protective factors are particularly beneficial in serving some of these functions.

The HII targets and addresses areas of risk and need that are specifically identified and assessed by the United Kingdom's *Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG 22+)*, an extremism risk-assessment framework developed in-house by the National Offender Management Service.<sup>21</sup> This is consistent with how other assessments and programs have been developed recently, such as sex offender treatment programs structured to target risk and need areas identified in associated assessment protocols.<sup>22</sup> Experience suggests that facilitators and participants typically find program content more relevant and meaningful because it directly addresses issues—identified through assessment—associated with participants' engagement and disengagement, offending, and desistance. However, it is acknowledged that given limitations in our understanding of the factors associated with violent extremist offending, questions remain regarding whether intervention content may be inappropriate or ineffective if wrongly targeted. Developing our understanding about which factors and circumstances may be more criminogenic than others (or which

contribute to disengagement and desistance) will be important in the development of effective programs.

Suggested principles:

- Programs should be informed by a comprehensive violent extremism risk assessment that identifies factors and circumstances contributing to both individual engagement and offending, and disengagement and desistance.
- Programs should explicitly target—through their content and delivery—factors and circumstances that directly contribute to an individual's engagement and offending.
- Where possible, dynamic assessments should be delivered at the start of and throughout the intervention process to inform the baseline, assess progress, and inform changes to the content and delivery of programs.

### 3. Responsivity Principle: Adopting Robust Approaches and Adapting to Individual Circumstances

Ensuring that programs are delivered responsively appears to be as important for effective programs with VEOs as for other offender groups. Responsivity typically refers to employing dynamic intervention approaches that are effective at changing behavior, typically those that employ behavioral, cognitive behavioral, and social learning approaches (the so-called general responsivity principle). In addition, it refers to employing approaches that respond to the particular needs and circumstances of individuals to enable them to maximize their participation, learning, and personal change (the specific responsivity principle). This includes responding to features such as age, gender, personality, learning ability, and cultural circumstances.

#### *General Responsivity*

Empirical research indicates that programs to prevent reoffending that are cognitive-behavioral in nature and teach prosocial skills and attitudes tend to be most effective.<sup>23</sup> Such programs typically address thinking and behavior that has contributed to past offending,

<sup>21</sup> Her Majesty's Government, National Offender Management Service, *Extremism Risk Guidelines: Structured Professional Guidelines for Assessing Risk of Extremist Offending (ERG22+)* (London: Ministry of Justice Publications, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Helen Wakeling, Anthony Beech, and Nick Freemantle, "Investigating Treatment Change and Its Relationship to Recidivism in a Sample of 3773 Sex Offenders in the UK," *Psychology, Crime and Law* 19, no. 3 (2013): 233–252.

<sup>23</sup> Andrews and Bonta, *Psychology of Criminal Conduct*.

develop participant strengths and a prosocial identity (such as the so-called Good Lives Model of offender rehabilitation, which emphasizes the need to enable offenders to fulfill their needs and values through prosocial means), and teach new ways of thinking and behaving that support desistance.<sup>24</sup> It is acknowledged that there is some overlap in the goals and approaches typically associated with so-called deradicalization programs and those used to prevent other forms of offending.<sup>25</sup> For example, both can focus on addressing attitudes, beliefs, or ways of thinking that justify, entitle, and support harming others. This is similar for so-called disengagement interventions that, like other offending behavior programs, emphasize changes in behavior, including relationships with other people.<sup>26</sup> However, there are also differences between many of those who commit extremist violence and the nature of extremist violence when compared with other offenders or forms of offending. This raises questions about whether features of programs that are effective with other offender groups can be simplistically generalized to programs for those who commit extremist violence.

One key difference between such programs is the apparent role of engagement and identification in the process individuals take toward committing violent extremist offenses (and the equivalent role of disengagement and disidentification in the desistance process). The importance of an individual's relationship with a group, cause, or ideology in relation to the individual's offending or desistance is not considered pertinent for most other forms of offending (with the possible exception of other group-based offending). Focusing on, challenging, and renegotiating identification and/or engagement with a particular group, cause, or ideology is arguably a more desirable and important approach than for other offending behavior programs and more akin with disengagement approaches typically delivered in this field.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, given that in many—but not all—cases, VEOs do not share similar backgrounds to those who typically commit other forms of offenses (with regard to educational achievement, social functioning,

employability, stable upbringing, etc.), a focus on addressing skills deficits and enhancing skills per se may be less relevant for many among this group of offenders. In light of these types of differences, the HII was designed to integrate important features of programs to prevent other forms of reoffending with those distinct features of programs to prevent extremist violence.

Experience indicates that this integrated approach appears to have impacted VEOs in a number of ways with regard to changing their engagement or identification, as well as their willingness to support or commit offenses. It has enabled some participants to express openly for the first time troubling thoughts and feelings related to their offending and to question the legitimacy and productiveness of their offending. It has also helped some gain a sense of “moving on” and develop a more-robust, resilient, and/or prosocial identity less vulnerable to indoctrination. Others were able to develop insight into why they became interested in and involved with extremism and chose to offend and how these circumstances can be changed or managed to prevent relapse. In addition, it appears to have contributed to significant behavioral changes considered to represent indicators of efficacy. Some participants appear to have ended or reduced their contact with codefendants and more proactively resisted peer pressure from others involved in violent extremist groups. Others appear to have improved their ability to manage feeling threatened by other groups by using different coping strategies. Certain individuals have even taken active steps to develop new relationships, interests, and occupations, apparently reducing their attraction to and/or dependence on extremist groups, causes, or ideas to meet their needs. Changes have also been observed in participants strengthening their relationships with professionals and choosing to assist other agencies in their investigations and work. As in programs with other offender groups, one of the key processes in instigating changes has been facilitating cognitive dissonance. This is where individuals are confronted with inconsistencies, discrepancies, or contradictions between their extremist

<sup>24</sup> Tony Ward and Claire Stewart, “Criminogenic Needs and Human Needs: A Theoretical Model,” *Psychology, Crime and Law* 9, no. 2 (2003): 125–143.

<sup>25</sup> Hamed El-Said, “Deradicalising Islamists: Programs and Their Impact in Muslim Majority States,” *Developments in Radicalisation and Political Violence*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Tore Bjørgo, Japp Van Donselaar, and Sara Grunenber, “Exit From Right-Wing Extremist Groups: Lessons From Disengagement Programmes in Norway, Sweden and Germany,” in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

values, beliefs, ideas, relationships, and activities on the one hand and other values that are important to them on the other—for example, where individuals have to consider that their involvement in extremist violence contradicts the value they may place on protecting innocent people.

A key feature that appears to characterize more-successful interventions is an emphasis on current and future behavior and identity, rather than over-analysis of past behavior and circumstances. A balance between understanding past issues and problems while translating this into commitments to change current and future attitudes and behavior appears particularly vital. This is reflected in the importance of actively producing behavioral changes during programs to reinforce new commitments while having professional support in place to facilitate them. Similarly, it may be helpful for some individuals to provide further booster sessions after intervention to maintain changes and commitments, especially for participants who may experience significant pressure from others or experience significant grief through the disengagement process.

Suggested principles:

- Programs should integrate approaches proven to be effective in reducing or preventing reoffending with approaches that target distinct features of violent extremist offending and desistance.
- Programs should identify proxy indicators of efficacy, including behavioral measures.
- Programs should seek to provoke cognitive dissonance through exposing inconsistencies in participant beliefs, values, actions, and self-image.
- Programs should be positively focused on a beneficiary's current and future functioning where possible, enabling insight and changes to be practiced, expressed, and demonstrated in his or her everyday life. This includes ensuring support is in place to maintain learning and change when programs are completed.

#### *Specific Responsivity*

As with programs for other offender groups, how programs are delivered to accommodate individual

differences among extremist offenders appears significant in how effective they are. A number of aspects are deemed particularly important with this group. Outlined below, they include the level of (dis)engagement, mental health, idiosyncratic motives, cultural and religious issues, and timing.

One of the differences between VEOs and other offenders (with the exception of those who offend on behalf of criminal groups) is the influence that the processes of engagement and identification with a particular group, cause, or ideology play in their offending. When planning how to intervene with extremist offenders, giving due regard to the intensity and nature of an individual's engagement appears important in terms of intervening appropriately and effectively. For example, approaching an individual for intervention who is highly identified with a violent extremist cause as though that individual is simply involved for opportunistic reasons is likely to have a counterproductive impact on the participation in, motivation for, and efficacy of the intervention. Similarly, approaching an individual who has already shown significant progress toward disengaging or disidentifying from a particular ideology as if that individual remains highly engaged and identified with the extremist cause is also likely to impact negatively on participation, motivation, and efficacy. Effective programs appear to be those that are delivered responsively and sensitively to the past and current relationship an individual has with a particular group, cause, or ideology, with an eye toward the desired future outcome. Some programs may need to focus on consolidating changes in thinking or behavior that have already occurred, reinforcing and developing existing disaffection; other programs may need to focus on challenging offenders to reconsider their actions for the first time. For those who are reluctant to participate, programs may focus at a rudimentary level to slowly build trust and begin a process of personal examination.

Debate continues about the role of mental health (including personality disorder) in causing individuals to become interested and involved in violent extremism and in committing extremist offenses.<sup>28</sup> The literature suggests that over recent decades, there has been a shift from interpreting violent extremist offenses as the result of a terrorist personality (therefore essentially pathologized) to behavior committed by those who are

<sup>28</sup> John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

seemingly normal and well adjusted.<sup>29</sup> Experience suggests that the role of mental health is far more complicated once individual accounts and lives are considered closely. This may be particularly the case for so-called lone actors who commit extremist offenses in relative isolation from other individuals. There seem to be many offenders who do not suffer from any apparent mental health issues, although they may still present emotional and personal vulnerabilities. There are also those for whom mental health issues do seem to have played a role, either through motivating interest and engagement or enabling them to support or commit offenses. For example, violent extremist ideologies can propose simple, concrete, and certain ways of responding to the world that can be particularly attractive to those with autism-type conditions. Similarly, involvement in groups that explicitly claim superiority over other groups can be particularly attractive to those who have narcissistic personalities, since they also typically lack empathy toward others and have little remorse about harming them. Effective programs appear to be those that account for these issues in different ways. For some individuals, programs that specifically address mental health issues may in themselves prevent further offending. For others, a combination of intervention work that addresses mental health issues and extremist offending may be most appropriate. Programs that seek to accommodate how mental issues may impact their delivery are also likely to be more responsive, as are those that target these issues specifically in relation to broader areas of change being addressed (e.g., identity issues and group conflict).

Intervention work has also revealed various idiosyncratic factors and circumstances that may contribute to an individual's engagement and offending that may not be apparent or emphasized in the literature, for example, a desire to initiate or maintain romantic relationships, an opportunity to demonstrate expertise and be recognized for it (such as information technology skills), or a desire to "get one over" on the authorities. Programs and assessments need to be able to account for such idiosyncratic factors and circumstances appropriately. It is important that the often-nuanced, complex, and unique circumstances that influence individual lives are appropriately accommodated. Similarly, the explanations individuals

initially provide for their involvement and offending may not remain the same or necessarily reflect reality. For example, participants may state that they wanted to contribute to global change (a significant aspiration), but over time they may disclose they were actually involved because of the excitement it brought them (a more-mundane explanation). Being responsive to these issues and not ignoring or dismissing such motives and explanations is, therefore, an important consideration. Similarly, one-to-one programs can be used with a diverse spectrum of offenders when they are designed to be flexible and accommodate differences between individuals within an evidence-based framework. This includes differences in gender, age, religion, group/cause/ideologies, and types of offense.

In the author's experience, programs based on addressing psychological and social issues and processes may complement certain religious programs and can strengthen overall efficacy. This may occur in a number of ways. First, some theological concepts align with psychological concepts that can be used to address involvement or identification with violent extremist ideas, groups, or causes. For example, the value of moderation in religion is consistent with the psychological concept of having a balanced identity (or identities) to lead a healthy and constructive life. Second, multiple voices coming from different perspectives but carrying a similar message are arguably more effective in enabling personal change than voices and perspectives in isolation. This can be particularly powerful when facilitating or encouraging disillusionment, demonstrating shared commonalities among different people, and in strengthening extremist resilient identities informed by spiritual and psychological understanding. Third, psychosocial programs that seek to respect religious identity can reduce mistrust, challenge the myth that programs are focused on removing or deprogramming religious values and beliefs, and reinforce the idea that religious identity can help protect against future reoffending. It is acknowledged that theological intervention may only be required for certain types of VEOs, although some of these points may have wider applicability. For example, motivation and engagement in extremist offenders may increase if they do not think programs are simply going to focus on removing their cherished beliefs but that they also respect their identity and

<sup>29</sup> See Andrew Silke, "Cheshire-Cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in Psychological Research," *Psychology, Crime and Law* 4, no. 1 (1998): 51–69, and Horgan, *Psychology of Terrorism*.

values. Identifying the primary goal of programs as seeking to prevent harm rather than change beliefs and values also appears to be beneficial for building trust, engagement, and motivation.

Suggested principles:

- Programs should recognize and be responsive to mental health issues (including personality disorders) with regard to how they may have contributed to individual engagement and offending, may influence participation and learning, and may impact disengagement and desistance.
- Programs should accommodate and be alert and responsive to addressing idiosyncratic motives and circumstances contributing to engagement, offending, disengagement, and desistance.
- Programs can be delivered to a diverse set of participants if designed to accommodate these differences and to target risks, needs, and objectives for change that overlap these differences.
- Programs based on addressing psychological and social issues and processes can be delivered alongside those addressing theological issues where content and goals are complementary.

#### 4. Organizational Principles: Supportive Settings, Staffing, and Management

Effective programs are those based on organizational principles focused on providing appropriate intervention settings, staffing, and management. Important features include programs being based on a strong theoretical basis; employing structured assessments; utilizing highly skilled facilitators who can build strong therapeutic relationships; being delivered in a rehabilitation-supportive environment; being effectively managed (e.g., provide appropriate staff training and supervision programs) and appropriately documented (including their aims, models of change, intended outcomes, and relevant exercises); and being effectively quality assured and evaluated. Experience suggests that these principles are also important for intervening with VEOs.

##### *Settings*

Participants appear more likely to consider and commit to personal change when they feel safe and secure to do

so. Such change is unlikely to be a priority if basic needs are not being met and personal safety and security are threatened. In custodial settings particularly, participation in intervention programs for VEOs can present challenges in relation to group and peer pressure, intimidation, and threats. The very act of participation can signal disloyalty or distrust to a shared identity that may trigger group reprisals. In custodial settings, it is more difficult to distance oneself from such pressures as well as participate discreetly. Because of these anxieties, some participants may also choose not to demonstrate changes (in attitudes, behavior, or commitments) outside of intervention sessions. Their overriding concern to survive in custody may take priority over their desire to openly and successfully disengage. This can have various consequences, including individuals not being able to fully make behavioral changes, individuals not openly and actively expressing changes in their commitments to groups, causes, or ideas (which could reinforce such changes in commitments), and limiting and distorting observed progress in daily activities. There are additional challenges, such as managing individuals who may participate on behalf of their group with their own agenda, managing those who participate simply to get a prison transfer without any desire to change their personal commitments, and the potential costs of transferring between prisons those who “go public” about their wish to disengage, where their ongoing presence in certain prison settings may inspire others to make similar choices.

Experience suggests that programs are more likely to be effective when participants feel safe and secure in their participation, participation can take place discreetly, facilitators are responsive to and considerate of participant safety, participants have other support networks in their lives, and arrangements can be made to offer protection or support participant resilience when required. In addition, settings that can, over time, communicate that genuine benefits and progress can result from participation and reinforce changes facilitated by programs while undermining myths about what programs will involve will be more successful in encouraging and maintaining meaningful participation and progress.

Therefore, one-to-one programs for VEOs carry various benefits, including (1) encouraging openness and confidence in disclosure, (2) enabling participants to reengage with their personal identity rather than

exclusively with the shared or social identity of the violent extremist group, (3) minimizing reinforcement and maintenance of extremist values, beliefs, and ways of thinking which would arguably be more likely in a group setting with similar individuals, and (4) allowing them to be tailored more flexibly and responsively to the needs of the individual. This appears to mitigate some of the issues previously outlined. However, it would be premature to suggest that one-to-one programs are the only delivery method for such programs, and there remain valid arguments for why group programs may be effective and appropriate under certain circumstances and for particular aims.

Given that the focus of many programs will be on disengagement (to facilitate desistance), those responsible for developing and delivering these programs need to consider how this objective can be effectively achieved. Indeed, the goal of some programs may be to actually encourage individuals to disidentify from violent extremist groups, causes, or ideas that have come to define who they are as a person and the lives they lead. In the author's experience, it is highly unlikely that programs can incentivize participants to change their relationship to violent extremist groups, causes, or ideologies unless attractive alternatives that can also meet their needs are available. The magnitude of this challenge should not be underestimated.

Programs seem to be most effective when they (1) help participants understand why establishing alternative identity commitments may be beneficial to them, (2) facilitate opportunities (often in partnership with other stakeholders) for fresh commitments to be developed, (3) provide opportunities that meet the personal needs that involvement in extremism fulfilled (e.g., belonging, significance/status, and self-worth), and (4) empower individuals to use these opportunities. A significant challenge for offenders serving sentences in both custody and community is that if restrictions on liberty (to maintain security) are too draconian, this can inadvertently limit opportunities or incentives for participants to identify elsewhere. Arguably, such conditions at best may maintain an individual's levels of engagement and at worst increase them. The most effective and appropriate programs are those that seek to maintain security and allow opportunity.

### *Staffing*

A consistent observation is that the strength of the relationship between facilitator and participant plays a

crucial role in the extent to which the participant engages, learns, and progresses during programs. This relationship not only appears to enable participants to learn from the content being delivered but provides a vehicle through which key issues can be addressed directly, such as challenging "us and them" views, modeling integrated thinking, and communicating tolerance. This relationship can be more difficult to establish when facilitators are also legally responsible for participants, such as probation officers who may have the power to recall participants to custody.

### *Management*

The provision of comprehensive manuals and training to deliver programs appears to increase facilitator confidence and competence to deliver this type of work. Manuals and training that include information on the theoretical background underlying an intervention, its intended aims and outcomes, guidance for specific session delivery, and suggested exercises appear to provide structure and direction to programs while empowering facilitator flexibility and discretion. Ongoing supervision and support seem to help ensure intervention integrity (i.e., that programs are being delivered as intended). It can also help facilitators understand the limits of their competence, check boundaries and prevent offender manipulation of practitioners, address gaps in knowledge, and develop professional skills. However, when participants are few in number and dispersed across multiple locations, challenges include limitations in practitioners being able to develop practice experience, establishing sustainable support and supervision structures, and monitoring ongoing delivery. Programs appear most effective when facilitators are provided with sufficient resources and time to prepare and deliver programs, actively involve themselves in supervision or support sessions, and are given opportunities to deliver programs with multiple participants (to help develop experience and competence).

Suggested principles:

- Programs should be delivered in settings that meet their basic needs, provide a sense of safety and security (and are sensitive to ongoing participant anxieties regarding these issues), and reinforce and reward participation and steps toward disengagement.
- Programs should be considerate of whether delivery in a group or one-to-one setting is

most likely to be appropriate and effective given the participants, aims, and intended outcomes of an intervention.

- Programs focused on disengagement should seek to facilitate opportunities that can meet similar needs (e.g., significance/status, purpose, self-worth, and security) in alternative ways through new relationships, occupations, and interests. They should also educate participants in understanding why such opportunities may be beneficial for them and empower them to develop, use, and maintain these opportunities.
- Programs should utilize the power of the facilitator-participant relationship to realize personal change.
- Programs should be delivered as intended (to preserve their integrity) by using appropriate intervention manuals, supervision, monitoring, and resourcing.

## CONCLUSION

In light of enduring limitations in our ability to empirically test the efficacy of risk-reduction programs to prevent extremist reoffending, identifying

alternative ways to measure efficacy and principles to develop effective programs is an important endeavor. This policy brief has indicated that broad principles used to design and deliver programs to prevent other groups of offenders from reoffending also appear to have currency with VEOs. However, some distinct challenges, issues, and features associated with extremist offending and offenders require such principles to be nuanced for this particular group. This brief outlined some suggested principles that may tentatively be considered to inform the ongoing design, development, delivery, and evaluation of programs intended to prevent violent extremist reoffending. Such principles need to be examined, tested, and refined to move the field toward a position where we can develop a more-confident understanding of not only what works, but with whom, when, why, and how.<sup>30</sup> Arguably, without a transparent and testable set of principles based on learning from and experience of intervention delivery (as well as wider empirical knowledge and research), systematic efforts to develop effective programs in this field are likely to remain limited.

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<sup>30</sup> Gemma Harper and Chloe Chitty, *The Impact of Corrections on Re-Offending: A Review of "What Works,"* 3rd ed. (London: Home Office, 2005).

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