



PREV

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW
ON THE OUTCOMES OF
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY
PREVENTION PROGRAMS
IN THE FIELD OF VIOLENT
RADICALIZATION

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The background features a large teal triangle on the left that tapers to the right. Below it is a light blue triangle that also tapers to the right. On the far right, a small orange triangle points to the right, partially overlapping the other shapes.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Over the past two decades, planned and executed attacks attributed to extremist movements or “lone actors” have intensified and spread throughout many parts of the world, amplifying the fears of local populations and prompting a number of governments to invest significant sums of money into preventing violent radicalization and extremism.

Despite these investments, current knowledge regarding best practices for prevention remains disparate, and the effectiveness of current practices has not yet been clearly established. This means that trillions of dollars are currently being spent funding programs whose effectiveness and potential side effects are unknown.

Objectives

Considering the above, the Canadian Practitioners Network for Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV; <https://cpnprev.ca/>) has conducted a systematic review on the effectiveness of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs in the field of preventing violent extremism (PVE). The goals of this review were threefold: **1)** to determine if primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs are able to counter violent radicalization; **2)** to identify specific program modalities associated with a higher chance of success or failure for the targeted populations; and **3)** to assess the quality of the literature in order to identify less reliable evidence, knowledge gaps, and studies which should be given more weight in the interpretation of results.

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The review integrated evidence on the following: **a)** religiously-inspired (e.g., Islamist), right-wing, extreme-left, and “single-issue” (e.g., misogyny) violent radicalization; **b)** outcomes classified by prevention levels; and **c)** benefits/harms, costs, transferability, and community-related implementation issues when mentioned by the authors. We used systematic review methods developed by the Campbell and Cochrane collaborations. The logic model driving the review is grounded in an ecosystemic public health model, dividing programs into primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention levels. Because the outcomes of primary/secondary PVE programs and those of tertiary prevention programs were very disparate, we decided to treat results of primary/secondary prevention programs separately from those of tertiary prevention programs. However, we used a common method for both reviews.

Results

Of the 11,836 studies generated from the searches undertaken (up to June 2019), only 56 were found to be eligible for this review (i.e., they included an empirical—quantitative or qualitative—evaluation of a primary or secondary prevention initiative using primary data).

Among these, 23 were found to be of insufficient methodological quality (score of 3/10 or less on the Quality of Study Assessment tool) and were therefore excluded.

The final set of studies comprised 33 evaluations of primary or secondary prevention programs. They reached a total sample of 6,520 individuals from 15 countries, with sample sizes ranging from 5 to 1,446 participants ($M = 210.32$, $SD = 396.0$).

Most of the identified studies ($k = 24$) evaluated programs targeting violent Islamist radicalization. Nine studies assessed the outcomes of “general” prevention programs, that is, programs that do not target a specific type of violent radicalization but rather aim to improve openness towards others, respect, civic education, etc., within both “vulnerable” individuals and the general population. Only one study assessed programs targeting violent

far-right radicalization, and none targeted far-left or single-issue violent radicalization.

Among the 33 program evaluation studies, 18 reported mostly positive outcomes, seven reported mixed outcomes (both positive and negative), and eight reported mostly negative outcomes. Of note, all negative assessments were related to initiatives under Prevent, the UK’s national PVE strategy. On average, primary and secondary prevention programs seemed more effective than targeted primary prevention programs. However, this result is inevitably linked to the multiple negative assessments of Prevent, a strategy encompassing multiple targeted primary prevention programs.

Discussion

Key Findings

1. Programs that target a specific ethnic or religious group—in this case Muslim communities—generate more negative/iatrogenic effects than benefits. Although some programs led to positive outcomes, most were viewed negatively not only by the minority communities they target, but also by stakeholders and personnel working for the program. The core mistake of targeted primary prevention programs is the conflation of religious background or ethnicity with the risk of violent radicalization. In absence of other empirically validated indicators, using those will lead to feelings of discrimination and stigmatization for the targeted communities;

2. Programs that focus on surveillance methods (monitoring and control) in education, healthcare, or via the use of hotlines generate more negative/iatrogenic effects than benefits. Similar to targeted primary prevention programs, surveilled participants (including staff) declared negative outcomes such fear of being spied upon, self-censorship, stigmatization of Muslim communities, and worsening of Muslim students’ university experiences;

3. Studies assessing the outcomes of police-community partnerships have produced mixed findings, likely due to problems with research design, methods, and measures. Most evaluation studies focused on the subjective perceptions of police officers, stakeholders, and community partners. As expected, these programs tended to be more positively perceived by police officers and stakeholders, who reported feelings of empowerment, acknowledgment, and mutual trust. Unfortunately, these views contrasted with those of targeted community members, who declared trust issues with the police and feelings of discrimination, which led to implementation issues;

4. Primary and secondary prevention programs seem to be effective in improving personal, interpersonal, or psychosocial characteristics that have been reported as potential protective factors against violent radicalization (e.g., empathy, openness towards others, conflict management skills). However, improvement in general protective factors cannot be assumed to be effective in reducing the risk of violence or involvement on a violent radical trajectory. This emphasizes

the need to distinguish between a program's impact on intermediate outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, psychological distress) from its impact on final outcomes (e.g., an individual's risk of acting out, not disengaging from a movement/ideology, promotion of violence);

5. The current systematic review found only three eligible counternarrative program evaluations. Even though these studies reported mostly positive results, none of these studies measured the impact between exposure to counternarrative campaigns and violent radical attitudes or behaviors, which limits the positive conclusions reached by the authors;

6. Of the 33 studies reviewed, none evaluated prevention programs targeting left-wing or single-issue violent radicalization, and only one targeted the far right, while 24 analyzed programs targeting violent Islamist radicalization and nine targeted violent radicalization in general.

Limitations of Studies

1. Reliable empirical data on primary and secondary PVE programs is currently limited. Of the 56 eligible studies, 23 did not achieve a score of more than 3/10 on the Quality of Study Assessment tool and were therefore excluded. The empirical studies reviewed generally suffered from weak experimental designs, small or biased samples, and heterogeneity of definitions, measures, and outcomes. This makes the integration of evidence quite challenging, especially since several manuscripts had multiple sections missing;

2. Conflicts of interest also permeate evaluation studies of primary and secondary prevention programs. In seven of the 33 studies reviewed, data relied mostly on the views of program providers, deciders, stakeholders, community partners, or police/correctional staff, who were solicited to assess the effectiveness of programs in which they were involved. In six studies, authors were also program implementers. In six others, the

This suggests that some prevalent types of radicalization do not receive appropriate consideration by researchers, funders, and program developers, or that evaluations that have been conducted were not made available to the public; and

7. Data is currently scarce concerning the implementation challenges of PVE programs. This obfuscates the avenues by which such programs may be improved in the future. Furthermore, studies very rarely mention facilitators, implementation successes, budget management issues, or the sustainability and transference of practices after project completion. None of the reviewed studies mentioned the costs of program or evaluation research, making it difficult to improve resource allocations in relation to expected outcomes.

perceptions of community members towards a program were used as primary data rather than asking those who went through the program itself. This results in evaluations that are potentially biased, overly positive (or negative in the case of initiatives related to UK's Prevent), and, more importantly, inattentive to the real impacts these programs have on the targeted population;

3. Instead of operationalizing success as, for example, the reduction of empirically documented risk factors related to violent radicalization, program designers sometimes used measures of user satisfaction or program provider satisfaction. Alternatively, some identified what they assumed to be risk factors and measured the program's ability to address them. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn concerning the real effectiveness of these programs in preventing and countering violent extremism;

4. Several studies did not assess for negative or iatrogenic outcomes, thus potentially introducing a bias in the interpretation of their effectiveness and obstacles to their comparability with programs that looked for negative outcomes. This may have resulted in a disservice to programs that have been more frequently evaluated and that assessed negative/iatrogenic outcomes;

5. Very few studies described or formulated a theory of change and logic model to understand the processes of change underlying a program's positive and negative outcomes. This could have helped to explain how some prevention activities were able to achieve the positive outcomes reported and to determine if these positive outcomes increased resilience towards radicalization to violence; and

Although evidence regarding primary and secondary PVE programs remains severely limited, the following preliminary recommendations are provided for professionals working in the field of PVE, based on the conclusions generated in this review.

Recommendations for Future Program Design, Implementation, and Delivery

1. Prevention programs should not target any specific cultural, religious, or ethnic group in the absence of other risk factors (i.e., targeted primary prevention) as this can result in the stigmatization of the targeted communities. This does not mean that programs should not be tailored to their audiences. When based on specific evidence and with buy-in from the involved communities, tailoring is, in fact, recommended;

2. Trust relationships with individuals and collaborations with communities are likely to be harmed if programs designed for primary or secondary prevention conflate surveillance/information gathering with psychosocial/mental health support. If your program contains components that may be used for surveillance/information gathering, be transparent with individuals and clearly explain the limits of your confidentiality commitments, as dictated by your professional code of conduct;

6. In conclusion, due to the lack of theoretically and methodologically robust empirical evaluations, our ability to identify best PVE practices based on empirical evidence is limited. Furthermore, although processes to violent radicalization may have some commonalities across types of extremist groups or individuals, generalizing findings across contexts is generally impossible given the limited state of evidence in the field, the diversity of populations and drivers of violent extremism in different states/societies, and the heterogeneity in programming approaches. Considering the lack of evaluative studies on far-right, far-left, or single-issue prevention programs, the conclusions of this report can only be applied to general programs or those targeting violent Islamist radicalization.

3. Primary and secondary prevention programs should not be expected to prevent an attack from occurring but rather to reduce the risk—in the mid- to long-run—that an individual may engage in violent radicalization. Well-designed primary and secondary PVE programs that target relevant risk and protective factors have generally been found to be effective and should be encouraged;

4. There is a need for primary and secondary prevention programs that address, among other things, extreme-left, extreme-right, and single-issue (e.g., misogyny) violent radicalization. Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers should encourage the implementation and evaluation of programs encompassing these types of extremism, especially in regions where they are prevalent;

5. The generalizability of PVE programs appears to be limited. Therefore, practitioners should refrain from transplanting a program “as is” from one context to another. Practitioners must adapt and tailor programs to local contexts; and

6. If funding enables it, methodologically robust evaluation models should be designed at the onset of programs. Stronger data concerning primary and secondary PVE programs are urgently needed.

Recommendations for Future Program Evaluation

1. When evaluating prevention programs, conflicts of interest and potential biases should be kept to a minimum or explicitly disclosed, if unavoidable. Evaluators should be authorized to publish and disseminate their findings independently;

2. Evaluators should aim for representative samples and prioritize data coming from program participants rather than staff, stakeholders, or community members not directly involved in the program. However, combining program beneficiaries with other types of participants (e.g., staff) can be a comprehensive way to conduct assessment;

3. Program designers and evaluators are encouraged to consider both intermediate (e.g., improved perspective taking) and final outcomes (e.g., reduction in violent radical attitudes or behaviors) that go beyond user satisfaction in their assessment of programs. Collecting data on final outcomes ensures that a program is truly effective and provides data on the link between risk and protective factors and violent radicalization;

4. Program designers and evaluators are encouraged to assess the negative/iatrogenic effects of their program. Results compiled in this systematic review suggest that rigorous program evaluations often report more negative outcomes than evaluations where these effects were not assessed. This does not mean these programs are any less effective. Therefore, policymakers, stakeholders, and funders must be supported in adequately understanding the results of program evaluations before making a value judgment as to their effectiveness;

5. In addition to the commonly reported positive/negative outcomes and implementation challenges, program designers and evaluators are encouraged to collect data about the monetary aspects, implementation facilitators, and sustainability of projects;

6. Quantitative research on primary and secondary PVE programs would benefit from using more robust experimental designs, namely by collecting data on control variables and using pre-/post-measurements, control groups, and/or randomly assigning participants to groups if the procedure abides by ethical standards (if not, quasi-experimental designs should be considered);

7. For qualitative research, ensure rigor in the analyses to minimize potential confirmation biases by researchers. Rather than simply reporting quotes that confirm the main narrative of the research, clearly disclose the discourse analysis procedure; and

8. Whether doing qualitative or quantitative research, try to formulate an initial theory of change that can explain your program’s expected effects and then build and disclose a logic model accordingly. If possible, as mentioned earlier, integrate intermediate and final outcomes in the model. With time, revise and complexify your model as needed.