

WHAT WORKS TO ADDRESS VIOLENT EXTREMISM?



Report Brief- *Peacebuilding Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Assessing the Evidence for Key Theories of Change*

Violent extremism (VE) is one of the most significant security challenges facing the global community. In 2016, 77 countries saw at least one terrorism related death, more than at any other time in the last 17 years.¹ VE not only directly claims the lives of thousands, it also drives humanitarian and political crises that sow even greater devastation.

The threat and impact of violent extremism are palpably real, but consensus around how to define, discuss, and respond to violent extremism remains nebulous. Over the last decade, research² from the peacebuilding field has identified the key drivers of violent extremism, however, our understanding of what works to address these drivers is less concrete. Furthermore, the close links between violent extremism and conflict has elicited a debate over if and how responses to violent extremism should be distinct from broader violence reduction initiatives. These evidence gaps have hindered the efficacy of programmatic and policy responses to VE.

The Alliance for Peacebuilding conducted a systematic subsector review of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) program evaluations, agency produced lessons summaries, evidence summaries, research papers, and white papers available within the public domain to answer three essential questions:

1. What do peacebuilding approaches to P/CVE reveal about the relationship between violence and violent extremism? Are there significant differences between the two phenomena that should shape programming and evaluation?
2. What are the primary theories of change (ToC) in peacebuilding approaches to P/CVE?
3. Which ToC are supported by research and evidence of impact? Which are not? Where are the gaps?

Distinct factors of VE and P/CVE programming

Terminology and Framing

- Self-identifying or being identified as vulnerable to violent extremism can lead to stigmatization.
- P/CVE is often associated with counter-terrorism (CT) and U.S. military and political goals, causing wariness among key stakeholders.
- The singling out of Muslim communities and “Islamic” extremism has weakened essential partnerships with community groups and international organizations who refuse to implement programs that frame VE as an Islamic problem.³

Global Drivers

- Many extremist organizations characterize local grievances as a microcosm of broader injustice in the international system.

¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index”, 2017.

² USAID, “Guide to the Drivers of Extremism”, 2009; Mercy Corps, “Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence”, 2015; Atran, Scott, “Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists”, 2011.

³ Tami Abdollah, Associated Press, “Fourth Muslim group rejects federal grant to fight extremism”, 2017.

- Militant action by local governments and foreign actors like the United States in areas with budding VE movements often bolster this narrative and fuel violence.
- VE groups are increasingly borderless; many VE groups recruit members from across the globe and perpetrate acts of violence in other countries.

VE Groups as Avenues for Justice/Revenge

- Where traditional governance and community structures have failed, some VE groups purport to provide an alternative source of justice and security.
- The personal grievances that might mobilize an individual to violence become tied to a formalized movement through which that individual can seek revenge against powers that have marginalized, ignored, or abused them. VE groups can provide a local and international banner under which marginalized individuals can find camaraderie, under which those who feel slighted can seek justice, and under which those who feel listless can find meaning.

Evaluative Hurdles

- Violence reduction programs aim to *lower* levels of violence, while P/CVE programs aim to *create* resiliency to a type of violence that is not consistently defined. However, several of the cases provide a promising starting point for how the field can adapt to this challenge. The cases revealed several indicators that measure widely accepted drivers of VE, including exposure to violence, perceptions of injustice, and treatment by the government relative to other communities. On a case by case basis, comparative studies of similar areas with differing levels of extremism successfully identified the major risk and protective factors within a community. The next step is to measure the field's capability to mitigate risk factors and enhance protective factors.

Theories of Change

The cases reviewed revealed that ToC behind P/CVE programming center around two approaches.

Approach #1: Altering the Behavior of Individuals Deemed at-risk of Engaging in Violence

- If at-risk youth feel empowered and capable of making a difference in their communities through peaceful mechanisms, then they will be less inclined to support and/or engage in violent extremism.
- If at-risk youth are provided with tangible skills for social and economic advancement, then they will be less inclined to support and/or engage in violent extremism.

Approach #2: Increasing Community Capacity to Resist and Mitigate Violence

- If communities feel that governments and security institutions are trustworthy, accountable, and responsive to their needs, levels of VE will go down.
- If trusted leaders in the community are empowered to understand and mitigate the risks of VE, they will exert their influence to resist VE movements and levels of VE will go down.
- If members of distinct groups have opportunities to discuss their perspectives and are provided strategies for forging relationships with one another, they will be more tolerant of one another and be less likely to support violent extremism.

Conclusions: Where is the evidence?

While none of the ToC showed definitive ability to influence levels of VE, overall, **the community approach has been more successful than the targeted approach.** One possible explanation is because being identified as "at-risk" for violent extremism is stigmatizing and serves to further isolate the population that programming is aiming to serve. Another possibility is that community and global grievances are more powerful drivers of VE than individual grievances. The cases revealed that people are more likely to condone and support VE when they believe their community or country has been marginalized and treated unfairly relative to others, rather than when they feel personally slighted. Lastly, there is no guarantee that programs can successfully identify who is "at-risk". Several of the cases examined reflected that programs left out individuals who may not obviously be at-risk and ignored the effects of VE on large

groups of the population, especially women. Program evaluations consistently articulated that lack of gendered analysis impeded the overall effectiveness of the initiative. Regardless of the reasons behind the discrepancy between the relative success of individual and community approaches, the targeted individual approach only showed impact when it was linked to efforts to make change at the community level, while the programs aiming to build resiliency to VE by increasing the strength and capacity of community networks were promising on their own.

Recommendations

- The peacebuilding field should more consistently employ indicators designed to measure grievances that are consistently thought to drive VE. These indicators include but are not limited to: level of violence experienced by the community, belief that violence is sometimes necessary, perception of treatment by the government and international community relative to others.
- After conducting research to identify the conditions fomenting risk of VE and the characteristics building resiliency to VE within a community, the peacebuilding field should employ baseline and endline studies or surveys of control and treatment groups to measure how its programming affected those factors.
- The field should dedicate resources to explore alternative measures of risk and resilience to VE and methods for assessing these measures.
- Peacebuilding P/CVE programming should focus on addressing the needs of the entire community, rather than those deemed to be “at-risk” of VE.
- When programming does focus on increasing the social, economic, or educational capital of targeted individuals, it must also explore avenues for those individuals to utilize the capital within the community and for authority figures within the community to effectively respond to their needs.
- The delineation of who constitutes an “at-risk” individual should be expanded to account for the complex reasons and mechanisms for supporting VE groups and causes. Furthermore, programs should recognize that level of individual risk is closely linked to broader community, country, and global level factors.

