

Best Practices for Developing Resilient Communities and Addressing Violent Extremism

OVERVIEW

Lessons learned from the fields of mental health and education can uniquely contribute to best practices for developing resilient communities and addressing violent extremism.

WHAT IS COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CVE)?

CVE is “a realm of policy, programs, and interventions designed to prevent individuals from engaging in violence associated with radical political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and groups.” CVE aims to address violent extremism in all its forms, regardless of ideology.

CHALLENGES OF CURRENT APPROACH TO CVE

CVE has run into significant resistance from some Muslim American communities. CVE grew out of the recognition that counterterrorism approaches were not adequate for preventing radicalization to violence and that community-based approaches were needed. Many community members are resistant to CVE due to past targeting, stigmatization, and stereotyping of Muslim American communities. Our experience in participatory research, a technique used in certain public health scenarios, suggests that part of the difficulty has been that community-based prevention and intervention of violent extremism does not adequately fit under a criminal justice framework, and CVE programming has been too narrowly tailored to violent extremism, when other issues are of equal or greater concern to communities. Furthermore, CVE initiatives have not yet adequately engaged mental health professionals and educators.

PROJECT GOALS AND KEY CONCLUSIONS

This study began with the recognition that CVE needs more than simply a name change and sought to build knowledge that could inform changes in policies and programs. The overall goals of this study were twofold:

1. Identify lessons learned from the mental health and education fields to inform ways of addressing violent extremism.
2. Delineate how professionals from the mental health and education fields could best become involved.

The key conclusion were:

1. A criminal justice framework is insufficient for addressing violent extremism.
2. Efforts to address violent extremism should enhance community resilience to all hazards.
3. Multidisciplinary approaches have the potential to significantly enhance efforts to address violent extremism.

Unlike a criminal justice approach, basing violence prevention efforts in mental health and education approaches offers significant promise in building community buy-in and participation, the necessary foundation for community-based initiatives.

METHOD

This project involved a review of education and mental health literature by a multidisciplinary team inclusive of education and mental health professionals (N=5). The search focused on English-language literature post-1985. An iterative consensus process was used to identify key concepts and best practices that could potentially contribute to the development of healthy, resilient communities and counter targeted violence.

Multiple relevant themes from education and mental health were identified and integrated into one overall framework. The results of the literature review were then presented and discussed at a two-day meeting, supported by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate’s Office of University Programs and comprised of experts from education, mental health, law enforcement, federal agencies and Muslim communities (N = 25). This convening led to a revised framework, report, and other materials for dissemination.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS

PARTNERSHIP

- ENSURE** engagement efforts include a whole community approach
- DEVELOP** multidisciplinary teams that include mental health, education, religious, legal, and law enforcement expertise
- EMBED** activities within existing programs and organizations

RISK & THREAT ASSESSMENT

- ACKNOWLEDGE** that there is presently no basis in scientific knowledge for a quantitative risk assessment tool
- UTILIZE** a structured professional judgment approach to threat assessment
- FRAME** threat assessment as an access intervention that facilitates linkages to support and care

TREATMENT

- ADOPT** a highly flexible approach to devising the most appropriate support plan that best fits the needs of each person
- INCLUDE** possible roles for family therapy, individual psychotherapy, psychiatric medications, mentoring, life skills education, assistance with education and housing, as well as substance abuse treatment
- ATTUNE** treatments to developmental stages

COMMUNITY & FAMILY SUPPORT

- WORK** through community collaboration and seek community buy-in
- ASSESS** and address community needs and enhance community strengths
- ENGAGE** and empower community and family members of individuals of concern
- PROVIDE** educational support for families and peers

SOCIAL & STRUCTURAL FACTORS

- ADDRESS** structural factors and vulnerabilities
- UTILIZE** culturally responsive strategies and skills
- PROMOTE** culturally congruent programs
- FOCUS** on current and emerging threats that communities identify

PROGRAMS

- USE** multidimensional support packages with tiers of intervention
- INVOLVE** peers and former participants in intervention and prevention programs
- FACILITATE** access to mental health, education and law enforcement support services
- FOLLOW-UP** with individuals and hold regular team meetings

RESOURCES

- DEVELOP** protocols for interventions, inclusive of law enforcement

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- BUILD** capacity of helping professionals, including teachers, mental health providers and religious leaders

ASSESSMENT

- MONITOR AND ASSESS** prevention and intervention efforts, including process and outcome

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The research team would like to thank the 25 experts from education, mental health, law enforcement, federal agencies and Muslim communities who contributed to this research.



The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs through a Center of Excellence program led by the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu. This research was supported by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through awards made to the START and the first author. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or START.