

Applying the evidence-based approach to preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalisation

OVERVIEW

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and radicalisation has turned into a priority for governments and organisations worldwide. At the same time, there is a consensus among scholars, policy makers and practitioners that P/CVE and deradicalisation policies and practices must be rationally developed and informed by the most up-to-date scientific evidence produced in universities, research centres and workplaces. Since we often deal with scarce resources, anchoring the development of interventions and policies on sound theoretical and research foundations is a strategy to increase the chances that they successfully solve the problems they were designed to address.

But, scientific knowledge alone does not define evidence-based practice. The other two pillars necessarily include practitioners' expertise in radicalisation and terrorism fields and stakeholders' preferences.

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CONTEXT

Moving from old ways of working on P/CVE and deradicalisation to a well-informed and structured practice that takes into account the particularities and methods of intervention design, implementation and evaluation may prove challenging. The required change is about how professionals work and how they think about their work. In this regard, besides being a matter of practice, work based on evidence is also a matter of attitude.

Understanding the academic framework, how scientific evidence is produced and the role of practitioners and stakeholders while uncovering the particularities of intervention development will facilitate the change to a more rational way of working.

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation

EVIDENCE-BASED
POLICY AND
PRACTICE

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FINDINGS

- Although radicalisation is not a crime, it is an important risk factor for violent extremism and in this sense, P/CVE is framed in the broader context of crime prevention.
- Developing a P/CVE intervention is a process similar to developing a new product; it includes cycles of design, evaluation and improvement until a successful solution is achieved.
- Designing, implementing and evaluating P/CVE interventions is a creative activity that can be facilitated and improved using standardised methods.
- Although evaluating P/CVE interventions may seem tricky, it is a fundamental stage of evidence-based practice that should not be obviated.
- Reviews of P/CVE scientific literature, which systematically integrate findings from different research studies, are a valuable source of information when developing interventions.
- It is important to consider practitioners' thoughts, attitudes and feelings regarding the design and implementation of P/CVE interventions because how they implement them is critical for their success.
- Stakeholders also play a critical role in determining the success of an intervention. It is advisable to include them in every stage of the process and take into consideration their attitudes towards intervention approaches.
- Occasionally, practitioners and policy makers criticise scholars for their inexperience and ignorance of what occurs in the practical field. However, evidence-based practice can only be truly achieved if we integrate knowledge and strengths from both sides.
- Wanting to work based on evidence in the P/CVE field is not exempt from the possibility of malpractice if the evidence is wrongly interpreted or manipulated to achieve certain results, whether by ignorance or malfeasance. Here, as in any other case, it is wise to keep a critical attitude towards what can be said and done.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Working based on evidence has many advantages for policy and practice:

- It allows us to understand and determine the causal chain of events underlying a certain intervention, making it possible to adapt its working mechanisms to specific situations and groups. There is no need to re-invent new P/CVE interventions each time because we can rely on principles whose efficacy has already been demonstrated.
- Continuous evaluation, a principle of evidence-based practice, uncovers the weaknesses and strengths of design and implementation, which is critical to improving interventions and optimising resources.
- Participating in design and evaluation procedures will train practitioners to critically appraise scientific literature and strengthen their competencies in evaluation methods, facilitating the performance of high-quality internal evaluations.
- Counting on practitioners' knowledge of the field and experience in working with radicalised individuals, vulnerable populations and places at risk of violent extremism helps to ensure that interventions are tailored with an individual/problem-centred approach.
- Involving stakeholders in all stages of intervention development (i.e. design, implementation, evaluation) promotes their active participation and collaboration in a process that is seen as an 'own product', preventing their resistance against a programme, action or strategy that may otherwise be seen as imposed from the outside.
- Evidence-based principles increase the transparency of working processes, facilitating the discussion and acceptance of P/CVE policy by citizens and groups in the areas where they will be implemented.
- While base arguments in resounding scientific findings make policy and practice more easily accepted by the population, surveillance mechanisms should be activated to ensure that the evidence is not accidentally or incidentally manipulated.