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Lessons from crime prevention in preventing violent extremism by police

This paper explores whether the mechanisms and measures used in crime prevention work in preventing violent extremism (PVE). Although this paper argues that in general the mechanisms and principles of crime prevention are applicable to PVE, it also illustrates that certain successful crime prevention measures may have little, or even an adverse, effect in PVE. The paper then outlines a number of cross-cutting challenges in PVE, some of which can only be addressed by long-term police commitment. That being said, a significant challenge in reducing violent extremism lies in finding the right balance between short-term strategies (often repressive measures) and long-term strategies (for example, trust-building).

The main conclusion of this paper is that PVE can and should be approached with a holistic crime prevention framework, where — as long as police seek collaboration with other agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) — police have a role to play in primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

Crime Prevention and preventing violent extremism (PVE): the role of police

Crime prevention in a broad sense may be understood as efforts to reduce both the future occurrence of crime as well as the harmful consequences of crime to victims and society. Violent extremism and terrorist attacks are severe forms of crime, causing (physical) harm and fear among the population. PVE aims to reduce future occurrence of crimes motivated by extremist ideologies and group hatred, as well as their harmful consequences. As such, preventing violent extremism and terrorism is crime prevention in a broad sense, and the general principles and mechanisms of crime prevention are therefore largely applicable to PVE.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes violent extremism and terrorism from “ordinary” crime is that violent extremists or terrorists have some form of ideological motivation or justification; they seek to achieve political goals by making an impact beyond the immediate victims of violence ⁽¹⁾. This extra layer creates a complexity perhaps unknown to “ordinary” crime prevention, and, as illustrated in this paper, certain successful police measures in crime prevention may very well have an adverse effect when used in PVE.

PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY PREVENTION

In crime prevention, a common distinction is made between primary (universal), secondary (selective) and tertiary (indicated) prevention (see Lenos & Wouterse, 2018a). There are different understandings of this distinction, but one approach is to apply this to different target groups for prevention strategies and interventions.

- Primary prevention is targeted at whole population groups or everyone within a broad category.
- Secondary prevention is targeted at defined risk groups prone to committing criminal acts.
- Tertiary prevention is targeted at problem groups and individuals who demonstrate problematic behaviour.
- In addition, we may also include prevention targeted at (potential) victims of crime in order to reduce harm to individuals and to society as a whole.

Within the police field there are different ideas about the role police (should) play in primary, secondary or tertiary prevention. This is because European countries have different ideas about styles of policing, the responsibility of police and how the police should be organised (Jaschke et al., 2007). For example, the police in northern and western Europe generally tend to put a stronger emphasis on co-production of security through multi-agency (or interagency) collaboration and involvement of civil society in preventing crime. In this approach, building trust with the public and with partner agencies is the key to success (Sarma, 2018, pp. 6-7). On the other hand, police forces in southern and eastern Europe, generally tend to have a stronger emphasis on law enforcement and repressive means, and forms of partnership seem less structured. This traditional view on policing might hold that the police are primarily responsible for intervening when a crime has been committed or is about to be committed, which implies that police would play a role limited to tertiary prevention.

The local context in which police operate thus often determines the measures police will use in crime prevention. Moreover, the impact of these measures will likely vary from one country to another; what works in one context might not necessarily have a positive effect in a different setting ⁽²⁾. That being said, this paper argues that police have a role to play, not just in tertiary prevention, but also in primary and secondary prevention. In both primary and secondary prevention, police officers will mainly have supporting roles, and other preventive actors (e.g. teachers, social workers, mentors, health personnel, NGOs, etc.) are generally better suited to take the lead when working with, for example, vulnerable youth. However, as illustrated in the remainder of this paper, there

⁽¹⁾ The leading terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman (2006) defines terrorism as “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change” (p. 44).

⁽²⁾ In their book ‘Realistic Evaluation’, Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that impact of crime prevention measures are highly dependent upon the *context* in which a measure is introduced. A measure may have strong positive effects in one social context or with respect to one specific target group, but have limited or even strong negative effects in another context or with respect to another group. Different styles of policing and different levels of trust in society towards the police and public institutions are such contextual factors.

are still important tasks for police in primary and secondary prevention, and their efforts will be enhanced by cooperating and coordinating interventions with other prevention actors (3).

Before delving into the different police measures available in crime prevention and discussing the extent to which they are effective in PVE, it is important to explain which model of crime prevention is considered in this paper.

Applying a holistic model of crime prevention to PVE

There are three main schools of crime prevention, namely criminal justice-based prevention, social crime prevention and situational crime prevention. Elements from these three schools can be combined to form one holistic model of crime prevention (Bjørge, 2013, 2016a, 2016b). The result is **nine generic preventive mechanisms** that can, in principle, be applied to all forms of crime, including violent extremism and terrorism.

1. Establishing and maintaining normative barriers
2. Reducing recruitment
3. Deterrence
4. Disruption
5. Incapacitation
6. Protecting vulnerable targets
7. Reducing harm
8. Reducing rewards
9. Desistance and rehabilitation

This holistic model makes a basic distinction between preventive measures (what we do to prevent crime) and preventive mechanisms (how the measures work to prevent crime). The police are one of various key actors that play a role in these mechanisms. Other actors may include CSOs, social workers, politicians, and prison and probation services. Each actor has a different set of measures at their disposal to activate one or more of the nine mechanisms listed above. In this paper, we will focus on the role of police in each of these mechanisms.

In the next sections, this model is unpacked further. This is done by examining the extent to which each mechanism is effective in PVE, and by discussing measures police can take to activate the mechanism in question. Some of the mechanisms have similar measures at their disposal and have therefore been grouped together.

MECHANISM 1: ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING NORMATIVE BARRIERS

Establishing normative barriers against harming other people, and turning them into legal barriers, is probably the mechanism that prevents the largest amount of crime. Even within the field of PVE, criminal legislation has supported basic moral values, and new types of acts have been defined not just as wrong but also as illegal (4). The role and responsibility of police and law enforcement are commonly understood as ensuring that new norms and laws are implemented and followed. As such, norm setting is mainly **primary (or universal) prevention**, targeting entire populations in an attempt to create a safe and fair society made up of well-integrated citizens.

This mechanism is also about the promotion of values, specifically those values on which a state's identity and society are built. These types of values are established through basic socialisation within the family and at school, and through social interaction within a community. The extent to which the police are seen to promote these values is dependent on the behaviour they exhibit towards the general population: if police demonstrate fair and well-balanced behaviour towards all members of society, they will likely be perceived as a legitimate and well-respected public institution actively reinforcing and promoting those values defining the state's identity. However, if police demonstrate behaviour that undermines these values, such as disproportional suspicion towards or repression of certain groups in society, they risk triggering reactionary behaviour that also disrespects these values. Moreover, they may even prompt anger, resentment and radicalisation among these groups.

(3) See Lenos, S., & Keltjens, M., [The role for police officers in multi-agency working and information sharing](#), Ex Post Paper. Utrecht, the Netherlands: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017.

(4) Examples of laws passed in most European countries in recent years are bans on joining non-governmental paramilitary groups abroad (foreign fighters) and on financing terrorism.

Just as in general crime prevention, this mechanism plays an important role in PVE. However, dealing with violent extremists and terrorist offenders creates an extra challenge unknown to general crime prevention. Unlike with “ordinary” crime, violent extremism and radicalisation is about how an individual or group perceives their position in society and identifies their grievances. In addition, extremists and radicalising individuals feed off the perceived notion that the world is divided into binary categories of “us versus them”. What’s more, extremist groups or individuals are more likely to respect and rely on their own set of norms and values (created by the in-group) than on the norms and barriers imposed by a society and government by whom they feel abandoned (the out-group). At the very heart of Islamist extremism (IE), for example, rests the notion of a superior moral guideline. Islamist extremist leaders are often charismatic, ensuring even stronger traction to the moral guideline they offer. As a result, radicalised and extremist individuals are likely to be more immune to this mechanism than “ordinary” criminals.

In order to deal effectively with this challenge, a police force must be well trained and possess basic knowledge of cultural differences, intercultural communication, human rights and radicalisation processes. This will strengthen police in their ability to interact appropriately with all population groups, and thereby limit the chance that their behaviour is criticised or used by extremist groups or individuals as a reason to justify or strengthen their ideology.

In PVE, perhaps more than in general crime prevention, police thus play an important role in this type of prevention that has to respond to the complex dynamics of a population living in a society. Although active police involvement in this type of primary prevention may still require a shift in police culture in certain countries, many institutions of police education now provide both obligatory training in cultural awareness, human rights and intercultural communication skills (5).

MECHANISM 2 AND 3: REDUCING RECRUITMENT AND DETERRENCE

Reducing recruitment and deterrence are mechanisms commonly used in crime prevention. The police (and security services) are often the first to detect when young individuals are in contact with extremist groups promoting violence. Such contact may lead to further radicalisation in terms of adopting views condoning violence, and, eventually, engagement in violent or other criminal activities. The pre-criminal stage from early contact up until committing crimes should be considered a window of opportunity for early intervention by the police — in partnership with other preventive actors, such as youth workers, teachers, parents and CSOs — using positive means to redirect the young person. The idea of deterrence is that potential offenders will abstain from breaking the law because they feel that the negative consequences outweigh the potential gains. In general crime prevention, actors will rely mainly on **secondary, or selective, prevention measures**, thereby targeting individuals at risk of being recruited, and **tertiary (indicated) prevention**, targeting people already involved in violent extremism.

Effectively reducing recruitment and deterring involvement in violent extremism and terrorism can be challenging (Miller, 2013). First of all, identifying potential recruits can be very tricky since a lot of recruitment occurs online and targets individuals who do not necessarily “fit” a certain type or category. Moreover, many individuals who are at risk of being recruited or becoming involved in a violent extremist act are attracted to an ideology, but may never physically join an extremist group. In fact, in recent years, the phenomenon of lone actors has increased in both far-right extremism (FRE) and IE. Lone actors are difficult to identify and target directly because they often only appear on police radar when they are planning to carry out an attack, or when the attack has already been carried out (6). Moreover, the role that ideology plays in the case of extremists and terrorists ensures that they have a stronger motivation and willingness to suffer personal costs than ordinary criminals, who commit crimes often merely for their own egoistic or financial gains. To complicate matters further, police and law enforcement must be particularly careful that they are not seen as stigmatising certain population groups as this will likely strengthen the extremist narrative used to attract followers and new recruits.

Precisely because the objective and motivations of a terrorist or violent extremist offender are often more complex than those of, for example, a drug dealer, police officers must be well trained if they are to work effectively in PVE; they must have, for example, basic knowledge of Islam, in addition to knowledge of symbols, narratives and vocabulary used by extremist groups. Furthermore, they must understand the radicalisation process, including what motivated an individual to embrace a violent extremist ideology. Without this knowledge,

(5) See Lenos, S., & Keltjens, M., [RAN POL’s guide on training programmes for police officers in Europe](#). Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016, describing several training programmes specifically on various aspects of interacting with the public.

(6) This was the case with far-right extremist Breivik in Norway, whose modus operandi was copied by numerous other lone actors, including in Christchurch, New Zealand, El Paso, USA, and Halle, Germany.

it will be difficult for police to interact effectively with extremist individuals. This knowledge will also prove useful for early engagement with actors involved in offline recruitment. Monitoring and engaging with potential offline recruiters constitute an important measure for law enforcement and intelligence.

Another important police measure to reduce recruitment and deter involvement in violent extremism, particularly of lone actors, is multi-agency working. There are other institutions (schools, youth workers, family, for example) that are likely to have more information about certain individuals and more tools available than police. Early engagement with these actors is thus important; without some exchange of information, police may never have the full picture and may easily miss important signals. The effectiveness of such multi-agency collaboration, however, is dependent on trust between agencies and practitioners. The police have to build their “trust capital” through their day-to-day practice.

Police can also benefit from structures and expertise available at EU level, such as the Europol’s Internet Referral Unit (IRU) that flags and investigates extremist propaganda found on the internet and social media, and produces relevant and strategic insights into the most recent developments on online propaganda.

Finally, developing counter- or alternative narratives can also be an important approach to reduce recruitment and deter involvement in violent extremism (7). At EU level, for example, the European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN) supports the EU Member States and priority third countries in developing their strategic communications to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. Although police are unlikely to be the actor formulating these narratives — this being more the responsibility of civil society at large — they do have a role to play in promoting and reinforcing the messages developed in the counter- and alternative narratives.

Good practices: Norway has developed a mechanism known as “empowerment conversation” that aims to stop recruitment into violent extremism at an early stage. When police suspect that a young person is flirting with violent extremist groups or displays worrying behaviour, they meet that individual together with the parents to discuss the personal and legal consequences of their behaviour. Together, they try to explore the causes and find alternative ways of dealing with the underlying issues (8). This method, however, has its limitations. Whereas young far-right militants are often willing to talk with police, left-wing and Islamist extremists are usually more hostile (Bjørge, 2016b, p. 244).

MECHANISM 4,5 AND 8: DISRUPTION, INCAPACITATION AND REDUCING REWARDS

Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, many terrorist attacks have been foiled through various forms of intervention by the police and intelligence services (Bjørge, 2013, p. 55ff; Nesser, 2018). Disruption of violent attacks will often be accompanied or followed by incapacitation — i.e. removing the means or capacity to carry out an attack. Both disruption and incapacitation are **tertiary (or indicated) prevention**, targeting those actively involved in crime and violence. When terrorists fail to achieve their intended goals as a result of successful disruption or incapacitation measures, other violent extremists or terrorists will be less likely to repeat the same unsuccessful strategy again. Therefore, successful disruption and incapacitation measures reduce the rewards from extremist violence and terrorism. Thus, this is a form of **tertiary prevention**.

To detect a terrorist plot at an early stage, intelligence gathering in the broad sense is indispensable. In general, police and security services have had great success in detecting and stopping complex terrorist plots involving several accomplices. The biggest challenge in PVE, however, lies in detecting and disrupting lone actors and non-complex plots involving few participants and simple weapons such as knives and cars (Nesser, 2018).

To heighten the chances for successful disruption of, in particular, lone actors, police and law enforcement must be able to recognise the signs of radicalisation and violent extremism, and must have basic knowledge of symbols, narratives and other types of extremist propaganda material. This also applies to local community officers, who are often in close proximity to the people, and they must therefore also be able to recognise and interpret important signs that could be obtained from their daily work. One measure, therefore, is to provide proper training for the police force that strengthens their ability to recognise signals of radicalisation. This type of training will also reduce the likelihood of mistaking, for example, common Islamic symbols and practices for

(?) Some concrete guidelines for producing effective counter-narratives are now available (see Braddock & Horgan, 2015; Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018).

(8) For more details about the empowerment conversation, see the RAN Ex Post Paper ‘Police prevention and countering of far-right and far-left extremism’ (Lenos & Wouterse, 2018b, pp. 11-12) and ‘A guide to police empowerment conversations’ (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/7418_en). For a more comprehensive manual on how to carry out such empowerment conversations, see Politidirektoratet (2011).

radicalisation and IE, which may eventually even diminish the level of stigmatisation that can be experienced by Muslim communities.

Another challenge in PVE is related to the ability of extremist groups (FRE groups in particular) to navigate just within the limits of the law even though their messages aim to polarise society and marginalise certain population groups. This creates a situation in which it can be difficult to ascertain whether a certain statement or action falls under freedom of speech or should be labelled as incitement to hatred or discrimination. Without this clear delineation, authorities are not able to authorise disruption or incapacitation of certain activities.

Police will only feel comfortable to take measures aimed at disrupting or incapacitating violent extremism when there is a clear and proper legal framework in place. What this legal framework entails varies between European countries and often reflects a country's history, culture and traditions (9). A clear legal framework reflecting the norms and values of a democratic system is the only "safe framework" within which the police will be able to act against violent extremist groups and individuals and "not yet violent" extremist groups and individuals. To legally conduct activities that can have an impact on fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech or freedom of assembly, with the aim to prevent, for example, a demonstration from turning violent or a group from inciting hatred or violence, police need a clear legal framework to drive their actions. That being said, it is also important to ensure that police officers fully understand the legal framework in place in their country and are continuously trained and updated on any changes or developments in that legal framework.

Besides regular police training, a measure from general crime prevention that police can use to disrupt or incapacitate prospective foreign fighters is to confiscate the passports of persons suspected of planning to travel to countries known for jihadi activities. However, in PVE more than in general crime prevention, this measure requires solid intelligence and exchange of information between relevant agencies to pinpoint the right people. Moreover, finding the right balance is crucial: if this measure is used too broadly, it might be perceived as discriminatory and cause further radicalisation.

Finally, a measure can also be to reduce potential terrorists' access to the means required to carry out terrorist attacks, such as guns, explosives, chemical or radiological substances, and economic resources. In the Nordic countries, where it is relatively easy to obtain a gun permit for hunting and sports purposes, the police have in recent years withdrawn gun permits and confiscated both legal and illegal guns from members of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement, a movement considered to have a severe potential for violence (10).

MECHANISM 6: PROTECTING VULNERABLE TARGETS

An important police responsibility is to protect a wide range of buildings, places and people that might be attractive targets for criminal attacks. One of the main debates within the field of situational crime prevention is whether target hardening by protective measures leads to a displacement of crime to softer targets, or to a net reduction of crime. This same debate also applies to PVE, and when it comes to terrorism, there is no doubt that the displacement effect is significant.

Although target hardening has had a preventive impact (11), there is little evidence to suggest that security measures make terrorists give up their intentions to carry out attacks altogether. What makes PVE even more challenging is that for terrorists, unlike for "ordinary" criminals, the main target of attacks is unarmed civilians. A recent study of militant Islamists' targeting preferences in Europe documents that "a soft target focus is dominant and increasing, while particularly well-protected targets are almost totally avoided" (Hemmingby, 2017, para. 1).

The majority of attacks that have been carried out by far-right extremists have also been aimed at soft targets, which were relatively unprotected and vulnerable. In recent years, most of these attacks were carried out by lone actors, who have generally come to constitute a bigger concern than well-organised groups and movements. Consider the latest string of FRE attacks committed by lone actors, all seemingly inspired — DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY — by the 2011 attack on a political youth camp in Norway: the attack of a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019, followed by the attack at a Walmart store in El Paso, United States, the mosque attack in

(9) For example, expressing support for national socialism or Holocaust denial might be illegal in some countries but fully legal elsewhere.

(10) Other agencies or controlling bodies also have key roles in regulating access to resources that might be useful to terrorists. For example, banks are tasked with controlling suspicious financial transactions, and governmental agencies are in charge of limiting licences for buying certain types of fertiliser (ammonium nitrate with more than 16 % of nitrogen) to legitimate farmers only.

(11) Terrorists tend to abstain from attacking "hard" targets because the chances for succeeding are small (Clarke & Newman, 2006; Hemmingby, 2017).

Bærum, Norway, and the latest attack in Halle, Germany. Each of their modus operandi was inspired by the modus operandi of the lone actors who had acted before them (12).

These attacks, all unpredictable and mostly aimed at soft targets, illustrate how difficult it is for police and other law enforcement agencies to protect such a multitude of potential soft targets. At the same time, the attack in Halle, Germany, also illustrated that there is still a need to continue protecting vulnerable targets, such as synagogues. This wide array of potential soft and vulnerable targets has compelled law enforcement and police to rethink the way a terrorist attack can be prevented. It is impossible to have police in front of, for example, every potential soft or vulnerable target, but it is possible to reduce the risk by building multi-agency cooperation where people and institutions share and exchange information aimed at identifying potential lone actors capable of carrying out such an attack.

MECHANISM 7: REDUCING HARM

Despite a range of preventive measures, some terrorist attacks will slip through. When attacks happen, police have to be prepared for a wide range of emergency measures and they must assist and coordinate with other agencies to manage the crisis (13). In the event of a terrorist attack, weaknesses in preparedness may have fatal consequences, as was revealed during the far-right attack in Norway in 2011 (14).

To reduce the harmful consequences of violent extremist attacks, police must be prepared and they must have well-developed contingency plans. Police can ensure their preparedness by organising annual tabletop exercises and real-life role-play exercises for all levels of the police organisation, including a wide variety of scenarios. Moreover, crisis management trainings should also be provided. These exercises should be organised specifically for police and security forces, as well as for a multi-agency setting. Finally, it is also important that contingency plans are regularly updated and developed.

MECHANISM 9: DESISTANCE AND REHABILITATION

When we talk about PVE, we talk about deradicalisation and disengagement from violent extremism instead of desistance from crime. Promoting and facilitating exit processes is a form of **tertiary (indicated) prevention**, targeting people already involved in violent extremism.

Although desistance and rehabilitation of former offenders are challenging endeavours in general crime prevention as well, an individual's often strong adherence to an ideology makes disengagement from violent extremism and terrorism especially complex. Another particular challenge in PVE concerns foreign fighters and other "Syria travellers" returning to their homelands in Europe, or already being released from prison. This group presents a double challenge: their reintegration back into society, and at the same time securing society against the potential risk that some may decide to re-engage in violent extremism after their release.

Facilitating the disengagement and reintegration of violent extremist or terrorist offenders requires close collaboration and coordination between prison and probation services, the police and security services, as well as with social and health services and CSOs (see Molenkamp & Wouterse, 2018) (15). The role that police play in this, both before and after release from prison, varies from country to country. Often, the police are not involved at the pre-release stage. However, there is a two-fold benefit from involving the community police at this early stage, especially when it comes to engaging with the individual's family or building a relationship with the offender while still in prison (16): one, increasing the offender's trust in police authorities and preventing them

(12) For an analysis of trends in extreme right violence, see Bjørgo and Ravndal (2019) and Ravndal, Lygren, Hansen and Jupskås (2019).

(13) A main goal for this collective effort is to restore a sense of safety among the public and confidence in public institutions, and to reduce victimisation at the individual level as well as at group and societal levels. Many of these issues are discussed in the RAN Issue Paper 'Enhancing the resilience of victims after terrorist attacks' (Netten & van de Donk, 2018).

(14) Several glitches in police contingency planning and preparations delayed the police in stopping the ongoing attack on the island, causing loss of lives. In the aftermath, these failures in police preparedness led to costly reforms in the organisation of the Norwegian police, making contingency planning and preparedness a top priority. For some main findings of the 22 July 2012 Commission Report, see https://www.sintef.no/globalassets/project/nexus/01--report-22-july-gjorv-commision-summary_english_version.pdf

(14) For further reading on disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration, please see some of the following publications: RAN CoE (2017), 'Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families'; Christensen & Bjørgo (2018), 'How to manage returned foreign fighters and other Syria travellers? Measures for safeguarding and follow-up'; RAN CoE (2016), 'Outline: Deradicalisation interventions for violent extremism'; Molenkamp & Wouterse (2018), 'Triple P: Coordination and collaboration between police, prison and probation services in dealing with violent extremist and terrorist offenders'.

(16) In Aarhus, Denmark, it is not uncommon for someone from the local police to visit the extremist offender while in detention.

from reoffending; and two, this kind of proximity to the subject and their family gives police a more holistic understanding of the situation, which can be important for a risk assessment (Lenos & Smit, 2019). A comprehensive risk assessment must be carried out before release so that terrorist offenders can be properly followed up on after their release (17).

An important measure in the post-release stage is multi-agency working. In fact, there are indications that well-planned and implemented reintegration efforts may have positive effects and lower the chances of recidivism (18). In some countries, routines have been established to inform municipal authorities that they are about to receive a released foreign fighter or other terrorist offender in order to let local agencies prepare matters such as housing, psychological treatment and other relevant measures (Christensen & Bjørge, 2018). At the very least, police need to be informed of upcoming release dates for former extremist or terrorist offenders. However, given the unique position of police in the community, it makes sense for local police to be involved in the coordination between different actors working on the resocialisation of released offenders (Lenos & Smit, 2019).

Cross-cutting challenges in preventing violent extremism

Discussing how the mechanisms that constitute a holistic approach to crime prevention can be adopted and used in PVE has shed light on various cross-cutting challenges that deserve more attention. These are:

- coordination and information sharing between police and security forces;
- coordination and information sharing between police and other public agencies;
- trust-building;
- working in a polarised society.

COORDINATION AND INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN POLICE AND SECURITY SERVICES

One of the challenges in detecting violent radicalisation and disrupting terrorist plots is to put together pieces of information that may look relatively innocent in isolation but may give a more threatening image when put together. A main lesson from the 9-11 Commission was that different agencies had picked up so many pieces of information about the emerging terrorist plot that it could have been possible to understand what was about to happen and stop the attackers in advance if this information had been shared between the different agencies (19).

Information sharing and coordination is a particular challenge for the fragmented security systems in many European countries, where there is an array of police forces and security and intelligence agencies. Organisational boundaries, legal frameworks, cultures of secrecy and outright rivalries between police forces and agencies may hamper collaboration and information sharing, much to the detriment of public security. However, in recent years policies and organisational frameworks have been established in many countries to try to overcome these obstacles. Likewise, Europol, Interpol and several other frameworks have been established for sharing intelligence across national borders between police and security agencies.

COORDINATION AND INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN POLICE AND OTHER PUBLIC AGENCIES

Another recurring challenge is to facilitate coordination and information sharing between the police and other (public) agencies whose tasks and responsibilities are not directly related to security (20). Although police across

(17) The RAN CoE Returnee 45 is a risk assessment tool developed specifically for returnees, and it also provides a template for multi-agency responses. This and similar tools should be implemented by specially trained prison personnel and/or forensic psychologists/psychiatrists. Input from police and security services may be part of the assessment.

(18) A recent evaluation study of participants in a specialised reintegration initiative within the Dutch Probation Service, focusing on individuals convicted or suspected of involvement in terrorism, showed some promising results, with considerably lower recidivism rates than ordinary released offenders (van der Heide & Schuurman, 2018, p. 221ff).

(19) See the 9-11 Commission Report, pp. 416-419. <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/>

(20) Practitioners in schools, health and social services, youth work and other agencies might notice individuals who hold extremist views or undergo changes in their lives that give rise to worries. Becoming informed about such individuals is of great value to police and security services. Simultaneously, for teachers, social workers and other practitioners it can be useful to

Europe increasingly recognise the importance of multi-agency working, the lack of proper legislation can form a barrier to multi-agency cooperation.

That being said, many countries in northern and western Europe have developed elaborate models for multi-agency collaboration against crime in general and radicalisation and extremism in particular, often including CSOs in this collaboration as well (21). The Nordic countries, spearheaded by Denmark, have developed varieties of the so-called SSP model for collaboration between schools, social services and the police at the local level (22).

The Danish info-house model (or the Aarhus model) is a framework for cooperation between police districts and municipalities, and a blend of police officers, social workers or other professionals with relevant competences who work together (23). The model tries to unify two different agendas: protecting the state and society against terrorist attacks, and the welfare state's responsibility for the well-being of individuals (Hemmingsen, 2015).

The United Kingdom has a different approach to multi-agency collaboration. As part of a more general safeguarding approach, educational institutions and the health and welfare sector have been given a legal duty to report suspicious behaviour and concerns to local authorities. Police or security service personnel then assess these reports: substantiated cases may be followed up by positive social interventions to redirect the young person towards a prosocial track, or they may lead to surveillance and criminal prosecution (24).

The success of multi-agency working depends on the willingness of the actors involved to share information, especially when there is no legal basis to do so. This willingness is often based on the strength of a relationship between two or more actors (Lenos & Smit, 2019).

Trust-building

Trust is a key asset for police in PVE work. The success of multi-agency working depends on the ability and willingness of the actors involved to share information, and not all countries have the legal basis to do so. Without a legal basis, trust becomes the key ingredient to building strong relationships between different agencies. Hence, effective multi-agency collaboration is highly dependent on trust (Sarma, 2018).

Trust might be institutional or limited to individual practitioners. In general however, if the public — or sections of the population — have no confidence in the police, they are less likely to be willing to tip the police about suspicious or extremist activities in their neighbourhood, a potentially very important source of police information (25). In contrast, in countries with a generally high level of institutional and interpersonal trust (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Wollebæk, Steen-Johnsen, Enjolras, & Ødegård, 2013), people are also more likely to contact the police with their concerns.

Trust is something police should work on in peacetime by building a reputation of fairness and being perceived as serving and protecting the communities. Trust is something earned or lost through practice and style of policing (Lenos & Keltjens, 2016, pp. 9-10). Research has demonstrated that in countries and cities where the police are professional and fair towards citizens — including minority groups — people are more likely to be trustful and

discuss difficult cases with police experts in order to lay unnecessary worries to rest or to find constructive ways of helping these individuals onto more positive paths.

(21) For several examples of national models, see Lenos, S., & Keltjens, M., [The role for police officers in multi-agency working and information sharing](#), Ex Post Paper. Utrecht, the Netherlands: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017.

(22) Denmark has legislation that allows practitioners from different agencies to share sensitive information about individual youths for preventive purposes — with the important clause that the police are not allowed to use this information in criminal investigations. However, Finland and Sweden have stricter legislation and practices on confidentiality and exchange of sensitive information between agencies, making the SSP collaboration less operational and person-oriented than in Denmark.

(23) The info-houses collect incoming concerns and assess whether they are warranted. Assessments determine whether concerns are primarily related to (and best dealt with as) social challenges, or whether they involve security aspects. The info-houses then decide if and by whom action should be taken. Security concerns are passed to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service's Centre for Prevention. If there is no threat to security, the case is referred to the initiatives offered by the police or the municipality: either initiatives specifically designed for the prevention of extremism and radicalisation or more general ones such as career counselling, assistance with housing and therapy. If possible, the case is referred to an actor known and trusted by the individual in question. (See Hemmingsen, 2015. pp. 27-28)

(24) This Prevent duty has been met with fierce criticism from practitioners and CSOs for allegedly turning teachers and social workers into spies for the police. However, evaluations have found that teachers are far more accepting of the Prevent duty than critics would suggest (Busher, Choudhury, Thomas, & Harris, 2017).

(25) Recent research has shown that the majority of lone-actor terrorists leak their violent plans or intentions to people in their surroundings, such as family and friends (Bouhana, Corner, Gill, & Schuurman, 2018; Silver, Horgan, & Gill, 2017). These people in the vicinity of the potential perpetrator are more likely to inform police about this if police have been successful in establishing a certain level of trust among this section of the population.

cooperative (26). However, the police cannot be nice and friendly all the time, and it is necessary to find a reasonable balance between hard and soft interventions, and between repression and prevention (27).

Working in a polarised society

When we talk about terrorism and violent extremism we inevitably talk about many different aspects of society, including security, religion, identity, social inclusion and belonging, perceived marginalisation and even political views. This makes the link between violent extremism and the structure of society much stronger than in “ordinary” crime. Sensitive societal and political issues often do not play as strong a role when dealing with organised crime, and hence the public is less likely to take a strong stance in support of or against methods of general crime prevention, something that does happen when it comes to dealing with violent extremists or terrorist offenders.

So, the way a polarised society impacts PVE is much more prominent than it would impact ordinary crime prevention. Although it is important that all actors involved in PVE, including national governments, explain why certain actions are being taken, it is even more important that they do so without inadvertently fuelling the debate and polarising society further. Working with experts on strategic communication to formulate messages and communicate with the public could help actors navigate their way around this.

In addition, because of the difficulty and specificity of radicalisation and violent extremism, and the reaction these trigger from the public, police working in PVE require a much more specific skill set than police arresting drug dealers, for example. At the same time, working with radicalised individuals or violent extremist offenders can create feelings of resistance and antipathy among practitioners who have no previous experience working with this target group. These feelings are often the result of insufficient knowledge and understanding of the target group, of what motivated them to join an extremist group or embrace an extremist ideology and why it is so difficult to disengage (Lenos & Smit, 2019). These are obstacles that need to be overcome by all actors involved in PVE. Providing awareness sessions or trainings and providing counsellors or coaches able to assist professionals working with radicalised individuals might be ways to deal with some of these barriers.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the close relationship between general crime prevention and PVE, and explored the extent to which general principles, mechanisms and methods of crime prevention could apply to preventing violent extremism and terrorism. In so doing, the strengths, limitations and possible unintended side effects of certain measures and practices have been discussed. Central themes in this discussion were the different styles of policing and its impact on trust, as well as the role police might have in cooperating with other agencies in their joint efforts to prevent violent extremism. A summary of the key lessons and recommendations is listed below.

KEY LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- PVE can generally be based on the same principles and mechanisms as in general crime prevention — although some measures need to be specifically adapted for PVE.
- Like in general crime prevention, a holistic approach that applies a broad range of measures and mechanisms has a higher chance of reducing the problem than relying on a narrow range of measures alone.
- Multi-agency work and information sharing is essential to manage a complex problem like violent extremism. Police have a number of crucial measures, however other agencies, professions and civil society actors possess altogether a much broader range of relevant means than the police and may be more easily trusted by target groups to lead preventive interventions.
- Trust is key. Trust is built in peacetime through professional — and also through daily — interaction with the public and with partner agencies. To improve trust among the main actors involved in multi-agency activities, joint training and tabletop exercises can be very useful.

⁽²⁶⁾ See Tom Tyler’s (2006) discussion on procedural justice in his seminal book ‘Why People Obey the Law’.

⁽²⁷⁾ See Lenos, S., & Keltjens, M., [RAN POL’s guide on training programmes for police officers in Europe](#). Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016.

- The style and practice of policing makes a huge difference in PVE. If police are perceived as helpful, professional and fair towards all citizens, people are more likely to be trustful and cooperative.
- Communication and dialogue are a powerful and indispensable tool in PVE work, one that is important when dealing with the general public, with individuals at risk of radicalisation and with people already involved in extremism. Communication methods and skills need to be developed and trained.
- Certain measures and interventions can (unintentionally) reinforce extremist narratives or harden extremist convictions. This can be an unintended side effect of excessive suspicion directed at a certain minority group, or a disbalance between police efforts and the respect for fundamental rights, such as the freedom of expression. Having a well-trained police force and a proper and clear legal framework can limit some of these unintended side effects.

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