

RESEARCH AND PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON THE REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

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Research and practitioners' experiences provide insight into building capacity for working with violent extremists and meeting their specialized needs.



The United States has experienced a significant increase in individuals who have radicalized to crime and violence in support of domestic terrorism (see sidebar, “Defining Domestic Terrorism”).¹ These individuals range from those caught up in the moment and criminal opportunists, to those who have meticulously planned and carried out violent acts.

Successful rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalized incarcerated individuals has challenged probation and parole agencies, practitioners, and communities. Their criminal acts were motivated by radicalization, and thus the underlying causes of their radicalization must be addressed to prevent recidivism. However, practitioners and communities often have limited training and guidance on working with these individuals and meeting their specialized needs.

This article aims to overcome these gaps in the current system by offering a full continuum of holistic, evidence-based strategies intended to foster the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremists into society.

Disengagement and Deradicalization

Practitioners and community stakeholders challenged by working with extremists often ask, “Is deradicalization possible, and if so, how is it accomplished?” To answer this question, consideration should be given to the available evidence.

Defining Domestic Terrorism

Several definitions are used for domestic terrorism. The Homeland Security Act defines terrorism as

any activity that — (A) involves an act that — (i) is dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources; and (ii) is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State or other subdivision of the United States; and (B) appears to be intended — (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.¹

This statute provides a definition — not a criminal charge. Most individuals charged with domestic terrorism-related offenses are prosecuted for homicide, assault, arson, firearms and explosives offenses, hate crimes, crimes against property, and other offenses that may not have sentence enhancements for crimes related to domestic terrorism. As a result, many domestic terrorism-related crimes are not identified as such or tracked accordingly, thus distorting the true picture of domestic terrorism in the United States and limiting necessary responses. This has led to debates about whether there should be greater federal legislation on offenses related to domestic terrorism and sentence enhancements like those for foreign terrorism-related offenses.

¹ 6 U.S.C. 101, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2021-title6/pdf/USCODE-2021-title6-chap1-sec101.pdf>.

Researchers from the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), who were sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), developed a presentation to help train federal probation and pretrial services officers through a partnership with the Federal Judicial Center. The presentation explains

that working with extremists often entails tracking varying levels of success. These levels are defined by the “3 Ds” — desistance from criminal activity, disengagement from extremist associations and behaviors, and deradicalization (a cognitive shift away from beliefs supporting criminal behavior).² Although desistance and disengagement are more frequently achieved than deradicalization, failure to deradicalize is not a measure of reengagement in violent extremism.³

The START presentation also covers areas critical to the disengagement process, including:⁴

- Reasons why individuals become involved in extremist groups.
- Which extremist groups and ideologies are more likely to have members recidivate.
- Possible barriers to disengagement.
- Push and pull factors that can be incorporated in case planning strategies for individualized supervision and disengagement processes.⁵
- Reasons why people become disillusioned with extremism.
- Triggers or circumstances that contribute to relapse, reengagement, or recidivism.
- Circumstances and factors that affect time frames for disengagement.
- Factors and support services that contribute to the disengagement process.
- The significance of probation and parole personnel building relationships with people under supervision.

Additional NIJ-supported research provides insight into what supports and hinders disengagement. One project revealed that emotional factors — as opposed to intellectual factors — are influential in former extremists' disengagement decisions. Emotional factors include familial support, the discovery of purpose through work, prosocial relationships with others, and connections with prison or probation personnel.⁶ Conversely, barriers

Educational Materials and Training Resources on Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Although training and treatment modalities for work related to the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals involved in violent extremism and terrorism remain limited, the following are some available educational materials and training resources in this specialized area:

1. The National Counterterrorism Center, *2021 U.S. Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Booklet*, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-newsroom/nctc-resources>.
2. Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team, "First Responder's Toolbox: Reentry Service Partnerships Important in Terrorism Prevention," https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/127s_-_Reentry_Service_Partnerships_Important_in_Terrorism_Prevention.pdf.
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Prevention Resource Finder," <https://www.dhs.gov/prevention>.
4. Joint Terrorism Assessment Team, "First Responder's Toolbox: Reporting Suspicious Activity – Critical for Terrorism Prevention," <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/Reporting%20Suspicious%20Activity%20-%20First%20Responders%20Toolkit.pdf>.
5. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks," <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view>.
6. Nationwide SAR Initiative, "Suspicious Activity Reporting: Process Implementation Checklist," https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/17_0315_NSI_SAR-Process-Implementation-Checklist.pdf.
7. Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, <https://www.atapworldwide.org/>.
8. Violence Prevention Training, <https://vptraining.org>.
9. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Lone Offender Terrorism Report," <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/lone-offender-terrorism-report-111319.pdf/view>.
10. United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs, "The Rising Threat of Domestic Terrorism," https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/221116_HSGACMajorityReport_DomesticTerrorism&SocialMedia.pdf.

to disengagement are linked to having extremist family members and friends, poor social mobility, and prior criminal convictions, among other factors.⁷

A survey of probation officers found most contend that job training, substance use treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy,⁸ and psychological-behavioral interventions are the most effective strategies for a successful reintegration program.⁹ Unfortunately, a prominent barrier to reintegration is limited access to both mental health services and practitioners willing or trained to work with violent extremists.¹⁰

Ultimately, these research projects point to a lack of specialized services for violent extremists.¹¹ Still, they provide guidance for probation and parole agencies and practitioners to consider during case planning.

The Role of Probation and Parole Agencies in Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Probation and parole agencies provide community supervision that contributes to public safety and facilitates the disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of violent extremists. Evidence-based practices related to violent extremism are rare; however, there are strategies and frameworks currently in use that are guided by the experiences of national and international researchers and practitioners.¹² Two strategies for working with violent extremists are: (1) designating specialist probation and parole officers, and (2) adopting a multidisciplinary team approach.¹³

Specialist Probation and Parole Officers

Specialist probation and parole officers receive training and continue to educate themselves on the radicalization process, extremist ideologies, and mobilization behaviors (see sidebar, “Educational Materials and Training Resources on Violent Extremism and Terrorism”). They stay current on the culture, trends, and signs and symbols used by violent extremist groups or individuals.¹⁴

These officers are trained and experienced in specialized risk and needs assessments, case planning, disengagement practices, rapport building, and interviewing skills, and deliver these services holistically.¹⁵ Reduced officer caseloads help support this work at the proper engagement levels.

Multidisciplinary Team Approach

Each probation and parole jurisdiction and office has a unit or team working in this specialized area. The team holds regular meetings led by the specialist officers and their immediate supervisors. Mid- to upper-level managers have expertise in working with violent extremists, allowing them to appropriately guide this work and participate in the team’s case planning, strategy sessions, and training.¹⁶

The multidisciplinary, highly-trained team facilitates the disengagement and supervision process in a holistic manner. The team begins the reintegration planning process during the prison pre-release investigation, reviewing the proposed release plan and considering placement in a residential reentry center. The team coordinates a close-knit, individualized case planning and intervention process that may include mental health and substance use counselors, mentors, and halfway house staff, along with input from law enforcement, social services, and concerned family members.¹⁷

The team conducts regular risk and needs assessments. When possible, this process includes use of specialized tools, such as the Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG22+), Violent Extremist Risk Assessment-2 (VERA-2), or Terrorist Radicalization

Assessment Protocol (TRAP18), based on the circumstances of the case.¹⁸ Although these tools currently do not offer actuarial level prediction for risk of recidivism, they do offer assistance in addressing issues related to extremism. The risk and needs assessments focus on the underlying motivating factors of radicalization and current levels of engagement, intent, and capability (see sidebar, “Example Elements of the Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG22+)”). The case plan addresses push and pull factors, including developing a new prosocial identity, relationships, and ties to the community; meaning and purpose; significance and status; meaningful employment; and specialized treatment. NIJ’s research and the START presentation are helpful with this process and with identifying possible barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration.¹⁹

The team ensures that the proper special conditions of supervision are in place. This may include identifying specialized services to reduce recidivism (for example, drug or mental health treatment, mentors) and enforcing containment measures (that is, restrictions) to enhance public safety (for example, location monitoring, computer monitoring, polygraph, search and seizure)²⁰ (see sidebar, “Special Conditions of Supervision”). These conditions should be used strategically, judiciously, and with parsimony to avoid unintended consequences.

During supervision, the specialist officers collaborate with team members, law enforcement, and stakeholders to monitor for high-risk behaviors and criminal or technical violations. They swiftly intervene to mitigate risk and adjust supervision structures to include reincarceration if necessary.

Although these recommendations focus on supervision, rehabilitation, and reintegration, the team’s activities for violent extremists must begin at the time of arrest and continue through pretrial, sentencing, incarceration, and community supervision to align these processes as a full continuum of services.²¹ This will require systematic guidance and training in each of these specialized areas.

Example Elements of the Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG22+)

“The team considers four primary categories of factors when assessing defendant/offender risk, as identified through the use of the ERG22+. Through the tool, the team establishes the defendant’s/offender’s level of engagement in the group, cause, or ideology; intent level to carry out extremist actions and criminal behavior; capability to carry out acts of violence; and possible protective/mitigating factors. Extremists with military training, knowledge of explosives and firearms, prison experience, and access to extremist networks and resources bring higher levels of risk, as they have greater capability to carry out acts of violence. In addition, the team utilizes the ERG22+ to identify mitigating factors and positive progress that allows for adjustments in the intensity of the supervision plan. The basic factor areas of the tool are as follows:

Engagement:

1. Need to redress injustice and express grievance
2. Need to defend against threat
3. Need for identity, meaning, and belonging
4. Need for status
5. Need for excitement, comradeship, or adventure
6. Need for dominance
7. Susceptibility to indoctrination
8. Political/moral motivation
9. Opportunistic involvement
10. Family or friends support extremist offending
11. Transitional periods
12. Group influence and control
13. Mental health

Intent:

14. Over-identification with a group or cause
15. Us and them thinking
16. Dehumanization of the enemy
17. Attitudes that justify offending
18. Harmful means to an end
19. Harmful end objectives

Capability:

20. Individual knowledge, skills, and competencies
21. Access to networks, funding, and equipment
22. Criminal history

+ Any other factor

When the team has identified the underlying motivating factors of the individual’s radicalization, a complete plan addressing each motivating factor is developed to be carried out through the assigned probation/parole officers, practitioners, and other necessary community and social services.”

Source: Kevin D. Lowry, “Responding to the Challenges of Violent Extremism/Terrorism Cases for United States Probation and Pretrial Services,” *Journal for Deradicalization* no. 17 (2018): 28-88, <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/175>.

Special Conditions of Supervision

Below are examples of special conditions of supervision. These special conditions may not be entirely applicable for some circumstances and will need to be tailored for pretrial release, probation, and parole. They should be used strategically, judiciously, and with parsimony to avoid unintended consequences.

Computer/Internet Restrictions and Monitoring

You shall not possess or use a computer or have access to any online service without the prior approval of the probation officer. Your cooperation shall include, but not be limited to, allowing installation of a computer and internet monitoring program and/or identifying computer systems, internet-capable devices, and similar memory and electronic devices to which you have access. Monitoring may include random examinations of computer systems along with internet, electronic, and media storage devices under your control. The computer system or devices may be removed for a more thorough examination, if necessary. You shall contribute to the cost of such monitoring services, based on your ability to pay, as deemed appropriate by the probation officer.

You shall not access Internet Relay Chats or newsgroups or participate in any online social environment (i.e., Facebook, Twitter/X, Second Life, LinkedIn, Craigslist, FaceTime, WhatsApp, video/audio) or texting applications that allow user interaction unless preapproved and authorized by the probation officer and Court.

The defendant's written online communications, if any, shall be conducted in the English language unless the defendant receives the approval of the supervising officer.

Source: United States Probation and Pretrial Services, District of Minnesota, "Conditions of Supervision for Extremist Cases," unpublished, 1-2.

No Extremist/Terrorist Materials

You shall not possess, view, access, or otherwise use material that reflects extremist or terrorist views or is deemed to be inappropriate by the probation officer.

Media

You shall not have any direct, indirect, or third-party contact with any media personnel, journalist, or reporter unless granted permission from the Court. If you are approached by any media personnel, journalist, or reporter, you are not to give a comment or statement and shall immediately inform the supervising probation officer.

Mental Health Counseling

You shall participate in a mental health counseling program as approved by the probation officer. This program may include psychological/psychiatric counseling or treatment, family counseling, and mentor support.

Polygraph

You shall submit to periodic polygraph testing at the direction of the probation officer to ensure compliance with treatment and the requirements of supervision.

Specialized Services Needed

Traditional mental health and other types of services are available to this population. However, there are not enough treatment professionals, social service providers, mentors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations that have specialized or adequate training to work with violent extremists. Recruitment and education initiatives are

needed to overcome the concerns of individuals and organizations who have chosen not to work with this population and provide the necessary training and incentives to gain their services.

One specialized service that has grown over the years is using former extremists who have demonstrated significant activity working against extremism²² as peer support workers. These professional "formers"

are considered nongovernmental and are thus viewed as more objective and without lingering hostility toward an institution or related grievances. Peer support interventions may bring an authenticity that is generally unavailable in a correctional context, where staff may be seen as “part of the system.” Former extremists are credible messengers who can bridge this gap with radicalized individuals by sharing personal and inspiring experiences and counter-narratives to guide the disengagement and rehabilitation process.²³

Specialized NGOs that conduct peer mentoring have shown promise in helping defense counsel intervene with radicalized individuals throughout their trajectory from the pretrial period into the post-sentencing phase, up to and including pre-release activities vital for the rehabilitation and reintegration process.²⁴ These organizations can be a powerful tool for intervention services that represent veteran care, religious and cultural sensitivity, and a trauma-informed care approach.

Any mentoring or peer support related to religion or theology should be voluntary and provided by a carefully selected and vetted source. This type of mentoring focuses on changing an individual's commitment to violent extremism rather than changing their religion or theology. This is similar to changing an individual's thinking, beliefs, and attitudes about criminal behavior, which is the goal of correctional treatment and rehabilitation for all individuals who commit crimes.²⁵

Probation and parole agencies could scale up their partnerships with NGOs, such as Life After Hate and Parents for Peace, or at least better understand that these are available resources. More data are needed on interventions involving the use of former extremists in the rehabilitation and reintegration process.

Likelihood of Recidivism and Appropriate Prevention and Intervention Strategies

There is little research to date on recidivism among violent extremists; the research that exists suggests

that the recidivism rate is relatively low for most categories of extremists.²⁶ However, rates are higher for those involved in right-wing or single-issue domestic terrorism like white supremacist, anti-government/militia, and anti-abortion groups — surpassing violent jihadist extremists and other extremist types.²⁷

NIJ and START's research can help agencies focus on factors that increase risk and lead to better informed prevention and swift interventions for those who reengage in violent extremism and domestic terrorism-related activities during the reintegration process. As previously discussed, specialist probation and parole officers can collaborate with law enforcement and other stakeholders to monitor for high-risk behaviors and criminal or technical violations, swiftly intervene to mitigate risk, and adjust supervision structures to include reincarceration if necessary. Equally important, NIJ and START's research can help probation and parole agencies allocate resources to the most effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Recommendations

Gaps in the current system have challenged probation and parole agencies and communities throughout the United States as they work to rehabilitate and reintegrate violent extremists. Research and practitioners' experiences offer recommendations on building capacity for working with violent extremists and developing evidence-based practices for meeting their specialized needs. These recommendations provide guidance for a strategic action plan that includes:

- Strengthening interagency communication and partnerships to develop networks of law enforcement, specialized treatment providers, mentors, social services, NGOs, civil society organizations, and a variety of community support and resources.
- Designing a continuum of training modules that can be assembled into curricula that meet the needs of specific stakeholders, including probation and parole agencies.

- Developing practices and policies specific to violent extremists for probation and parole officers to use in pretrial services, pre-sentencing investigations, and community supervision.
- Constructing specialized risk and needs assessments for violent extremists.
- Combining the work of probation and parole officers, practitioners, and researchers to develop evidence-based practices for violent extremists.
- Standardizing competencies and expanding the use of former extremists and specialized NGOs to assist probation and parole agencies with interventions.
- Advancing standardized definitions and terminology for identifying violent extremists that can contribute to a national tracking system.
- Ensuring budgetary resources and staffing are at appropriate levels to support these initiatives.

To accomplish these steps, communities will need to establish initiatives to build partnerships and networks among government agencies and professionals working in this specialized area to help strengthen the work of probation and parole agencies as they reintegrate violent extremists. For example, many federal probation and pretrial services districts in the country are currently involved in the District of Minnesota's National Extremism/Terrorism Networking Group, which meets quarterly to share experiences, strategies for casework, and training. This could be replicated by probation and parole jurisdictions and practitioners throughout the United States.

Additional examples include the Federal Judicial Center's partnership with START to develop training for federal probation and pretrial services officers based on research by NIJ and START. There are also federal agencies that assist criminal justice agencies and their communities with training, educational materials, research projects, and resources through local and regional offices and online resources (see sidebar, "Educational Materials and Training Resources on Violent Extremism and Terrorism"). These agencies include the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, National Counterterrorism Center, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Building networks between these and other agencies can contribute to the development of evidence-based practices and training for working with violent extremists to build capacity for probation and parole agencies, practitioners, and their communities. Interagency communication and collaboration are necessary to support public safety and overcome gaps in the current system. Overall, with these strategies, stakeholders will be better positioned to establish a full continuum of holistic services that can lead to an individual's successful rehabilitation and reintegration as a law-abiding citizen.

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This article discusses the following awards:

- "Risk and Rehabilitation: Supporting the Work of Probation Officers in the Community Reentry of Extremist Offenders," award number 2019-ZA-CX-0003
- "Applying a Development Evaluation Approach To Address Community Safety and Health Challenges of Reintegration Programs in the USA," award number 2019-ZA-CX-0001

Notes

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NCJ 306129

Cite this article as: Kevin D. Lowry, Mubin Shaikh, and Raven A. Lewis, "Research and Practitioner Perspectives on the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremists," *NIJ Journal* 285, June 2024, <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/research-and-practitioner-perspectives-rehabilitation-and-reintegration-violent>.