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FINAL REPORT

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TITLE: Evaluability assessment and development of psychological-behavioral approaches to prevent terrorism and facilitate reintegration of violent extremists.

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Collaborating organizations: Not applicable

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SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT

OBJECTIVES, METHODS AND RESULTS

The overall goal of the proposed project is to optimize the implementation of prevention and reintegration efforts for criminal violent extremists by conducting an evaluability assessment that will help further develop and improve psychological-behavioral interventions commonly adopted as part of these efforts.

- **Objective 1:** Identify and achieve consensus on the most appropriate types of psychological-behavioral interventions for individuals engaged in criminal violent extremism or with criminal violent extremist groups that, on their own will, have requested access to such interventions.
- **Objective 2:** Standardize the delivery and monitoring of the psychological-behavioral interventions—to the extent possible—using trainings and data collection instruments.
- **Objective 3:** Conduct an evaluability assessment focused on the identified psychological-behavioral interventions.

Objective 1: Identify and achieve consensus on the most appropriate types of psychological-behavioral interventions for individuals engaged in criminal violent extremism or with criminal violent extremist groups that, on their own will, have requested access to such interventions.

METHODS

To identify **what type of psychological interventions have been used in tertiary programs** for the deradicalization, disengagement, and reintegration of extremists we conducted: 1) a scoping review of scientific and gray literature to identify tertiary prevention programs that include a psychological intervention and, 2) interviews with professionals experienced in the design and/or delivery of psychological interventions as part of tertiary prevention programs.

This literature review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al., 2021)¹. Scientific and grey literature articles were limited to the English language and published prior to December of 2022. The team screened 2347 articles, included 67 for final review describing 34 reintegration programs that cited the use of psychological interventions. These programs were conducted in 22 countries. To supplement this information derived from the literature the team contacted over 70 experts in reintegration programs, interviewed 25 with expertise in psychological approaches and ultimately included transcripts for analysis from 18 practitioners (13 from the US, 3 from Canada, 1 from the UK, and 1 from Lebanon) with direct in-depth experience in the use of these type of treatments. Results were summarized using quantitative and qualitative approaches.

RESULTS

As described in the paper we published and referred below as Muibu et al. “We were able to identify several psychological approaches used with criminal violent extremist clients across the globe. Out of the 34 programs identified in the literature, 10 described in sufficient detail the type of psychological intervention used as part of the program. The interventions listed were: emotional expression and cognitive flexibility skills training; aggression replacement therapy; functional family therapy; cognitive behavioral therapy; systems therapy; motivational interviewing, expressive therapy, and the House of Healing method. Additional programs vaguely mentioned the following approaches: mindfulness-based and trauma-informed approaches, as well as the use of counseling/therapy. The psychological interventions most frequently mentioned by the interviewees and agreed to be useful were: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (n=12), emotional regulation/distress tolerance techniques (n=7), trauma-informed care and trauma therapy (n=6), and dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) (n=6). In particular, interviewees trained in the use of DBT suggested this approach might be more beneficial than other techniques because it addresses the roots of maladaptive behaviors”.

Source/Publication: The methods and results of the work are described in detail in the following publication: Muibu, D., Vasaturo, A., Spurrell, W., Savoia, E.. The use of psychological interventions in tertiary prevention programs for individuals engaged in violent extremism: a scoping review and interviews. *Health Justice* 13, 17 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-025-00324-w>

Objective 2: Standardize the delivery and monitoring of the psychological-behavioral interventions—to the extent possible—using trainings and data collection instruments.

METHODS

This objective did not require research methods but rather the development of educational products for probation officers to increase awareness about psychological interventions suitable for this type of clients and a consensus meeting to clarify what type of professionals should be engaged during the delivery of such interventions.

RESULTS

To be able to evaluate any intervention it is important to understand how it is delivered and in particular what are the critical issues that need to be addressed during its implementation so that such issues can be properly evaluated. Based on the literature review and interviews with mental health providers described in objective 1, as well as interviews conducted with probation officers serving this population (as part of the previously funded NIJ award #2019-ZA-CX-0001), we identified two critical issues for the design of future evaluations:

- 1) Lack of probation officers’ awareness of specific psychological techniques limiting potential access to mental health services by individuals who have a history of engagement in criminal violent extremism and have been released from jail and,

2) Lack of clarity on the type and qualifications of the professionals delivering interventions to these clients and in particular the role of formers in reintegration efforts.

To be able to conduct an evaluability assessment on the use of psychological interventions with criminal extremist clients in probation we realized that we needed to first educate probation officers on the most promising psychological techniques described by the mental health practitioners interviewed in objective 1 to then survey them to understand if they believe such techniques can be useful and worth evaluating them. To partially fill this gap we engaged mental health providers with experience in treating individuals with a history of engagement in criminal violent extremism to develop a series of online educational videos on specific psychological techniques and case management tools tailored to probation officers.

The following short trainings were developed:

- 1) Introductory Training on Dialectical Behavioral Therapy;
- 2) Introductory Training on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder;
- 3) Introductory Training on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; and
- 4) Introductory Training on Autism.

The four trainings were recorded in person at the Harvard Chan School with support from the IT team and made available to the public on the website of the Community Safety Evaluation Lab (CSE-Lab). The trainings can be accessed following URL: <https://hsph.harvard.edu/research/community-safety/toolkits/trainings-for-probation-officers/>

In addition, we conducted a Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to clarify the type of professional roles engaged in reintegration efforts and in the delivery of psychological interventions. The NGT was conducted in Boston with 12 experts in violent extremism including social workers and mental health providers among others. During the meeting, participants acknowledged the importance of evaluating what types of professionals should be engaged in reintegration efforts. Among the most debated topic in this field is the role of formers in providing support to these individuals throughout their reintegration in society. More specifically the NGT participants developed recommendations on the qualifications that formers should have, what type of support they can provide, the type of training and certification they should have and specific skills.

Source/publication: The methods and results of the work are described in detail in the following publication: Mc Bride M, Stern J, Spurrell W. *On the Role of Formers in Violent Extremism Tertiary Prevention Programs*. Journal of Deradicalization Issue #42 Spring 2025, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/1021>

Objective 3: Conduct an evaluability assessment focused on the identified psychological interventions.

METHODS

We focused the evaluability assessment on the following 2 issues – as described by Peersman G. et al. (2015)ⁱⁱ

1. Evaluability Assessment to Inform the Intervention Design.
2. Evaluability Assessment to Inform the Design of the Monitoring and Evaluation Procedures Related to the Intervention.

Inform the Intervention Design: The intervention under investigation is the use of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) for criminal extremists on probation. To inform the intervention design, we first assessed the plausibility of utilizing DBT techniques with these individuals. We realized that probation officers are key actors in facilitating access to psychological interventions. To function effectively in this role, they need basic training on the mental health conditions and behavioral challenges they may encounter in this type of clients, as well as on the different techniques and approaches that can be used. Equipped with such knowledge, probation officers can initiate appropriate referrals and direct their clients to the most suitable mental health providers. To gather meaningful feedback from the probation officers we first trained them on DBT and asked them questions on its usefulness after they received the training. We were able to recruit 33 probation officers of which 18 watched the DBT introductory video we developed (aim 2) and completed a survey. The ages of the 18 officers ranged from 25 to 64 years old, 55% of whom were female. Most officers had a master's degree (67%), and none had less than a bachelor's degree. Fields of study represented by their post-bachelor's education included criminology, psychology, and social work. The great majority of officers (95%) reported that when they have a client who needs mental health care, they have a mechanism in place to refer them to a mental health provider, confirming their key role in this referral process. Issues such as lack of interest in getting therapy, limited availability of providers, logistical issues (i.e. transportation), lack of health insurance, and providers' refusal to take the client were all cited as challenges experienced in the referral process. In terms of years of experience officers had at least 5 years of experience and the majority had more than 15 years of experience (>66%). Probation officers reported to have received training in the following therapeutic approaches: CBT (84%), motivational interviewing (78%), behavioral modification (45%), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or ACT (12%), and DBT (23%). This result reinforced our hypothesis that DBT might be underutilized even if recognized as a potentially useful technique by mental health providers with direct experience in the field of violent extremism. Interestingly, only 2 out of 10 officers said they had a client who was successfully treated with psychological therapy. After watching the videos on DBT and related techniques, 83% of the officers reported to have gained some knowledge about the technique, 17% a lot of

knowledge, and 89% of officers reported that the DBT techniques introduced in the video would be beneficial in the management of individuals with a history of engagement in violent extremism. In addition, the probation officers reported that the most frequent mental health and behavioral issues encountered when supervising this type of client were anxiety, exploitation of others, history of trauma, grievance towards society, emotional dysregulation and narcissism. 2 officers responded to follow up questions at a 3-month interval after watching the videos further validating the usefulness of the techniques presented and so did 5 individuals with a history of engagement in violent extremism that received psychological interventions.

To further understand the usefulness of these techniques based on specific outcomes we reviewed 31 meta-analyses describing the effectiveness of DBT for the following ten conditions: suicide (n=22), self-directed violence (SDV) (n=18), depression (n=12), some form of social “functioning” (n=8), bipolar disorder (n=8), hopelessness (n=6), anger (n=5), disordered eating (n=4), and anxiety (n=3). Most of these conditions are experienced by this type of client further validating the potential benefit of using DBT for this population of criminal violent extremists.

These results confirm the plausibility of using DBT techniques for criminal extremists based on the opinions of probation officers with some knowledge about the technique and experience in managing this type of clients.

3. Inform the Design of the Monitoring and Evaluation Procedures Related to the Intervention.

To inform the design of an evaluation study on the effectiveness of DBT we have identified challenges and solutions related to the recruitment of probation officers as well as of clients that could provide feedback on the effectiveness of this approach.

⇒ Assessing the plausibility of recruiting probation officers for a full-scale evaluation study to test the effectiveness of DBT:

To be able to test the effectiveness of the use of DBT techniques in a full-scale evaluation study, it would be necessary to recruit a larger number of probation officers. In our study we identified a series of challenges in recruitment and potential solutions, described in bullet points below:

Challenges:

- Probation officers may not have time off or paid time available to receive additional training on DBT,
- There are no immediate professional incentives such as continuing education credits, a training participation certificate, or materials to use on the job after the training,
- Probation officers may not see the utility of behavioral approaches, viewing them as the therapists’ job,

- Probation officers may not be able to receive financial incentives to attend a training
- Both probation officers and behavioral health professionals may not recognize or understand their role in “targeted violence” and how it relates to their work and/or clientele,
- There may be concerns about liability and the optics of participation in a project related to violent extremism.

Potential solutions:

- Provide awareness-building to help professionals understand their role in preventing targeted violence and recognizing clients with violent extremist beliefs prior to offering the training and survey,
- Include practical summaries of the takeaway skills, like printable sample safety plan templates, worksheets for clients, or handouts for easy reference after the training,
- Host at least one in-person or hybrid training event to increase participation and provide networking opportunities,
- Ask probation officers to complete the initial survey during the event to increase participation,
- Connect with Department of Homeland Security Regional Prevention Coordinators (RPC’s) who are connecting with PTV professionals and have developed and obtained listservs for their geographic area ,
- Connect with state Sex Offender Management Boards and Domestic Violence Offender Management Boards that regulate the professional practice of probation management, such as the expectations of behavioral health providers and evaluation and treatment protocols for those on probation,
- Connect with Terrorism Liaison Officers (TLO’s) through state fusion centers, of which all states have at least one as mandated since the 9/11 attacks,
- Get the training approved through Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) certification for probation officers who are law enforcement officials,
- Get the training approved for continuing education credits for behavioral health providers (American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers),
- Outreach to federal, state, and/or local probation departments as the focus of future studies.
- Consider including parole officers, in addition to probation officers, since the management of parole and probation clients is largely similar.

⇒ **Assessing the plausibility of recruiting clients with a history of engagement in criminal violent extremism under probation for a full scale evaluation study to test the effectiveness of DBT:**

Challenge:

- Identifying and connecting with violent extremist offenders who have been or are currently on probation.

Potential Solutions:

- Increase the pool to parolees in addition to probationers, since there is likely to be a similar population of violent extremists who are placed on parole rather than probation. In either situation, the offender would be under supervision in the community with an officer, and usually a treatment provider and/or polygraph examiner serving as part of a multidisciplinary team.
- Identify offenders through probation officers, polygraph examiners, and behavioral health providers. Lists of approved professionals can be accessed through state Sex Offender Management Boards and Domestic Violence Management Boards. (Colorado example: [Report Preview](#) Professionals could be contacted directly, or the project information could be presented to the respective Boards for distribution through their listservs, and ideally, with their support and endorsement.

Challenge:

- As was the case with professionals completing the survey and training, there needed to be more time to gain the necessary trust for providers to pass the survey along to their clients. To do so, it is important to concisely convey the scope of what offenders would be asked to complete, the importance of getting their input, the risks, benefits, and any associated incentives including monetary or material offers to thank participants for their time.

Potential Solution:

- Due to the particular need for trust and respectful, ethical conduct with a potentially sensitive subject like targeted violence, ambassadors are key to connecting with potential participants who are on probation or have been on probation. Early connections should be made with professionals who have connections with offender populations. Suggestions include treatment providers, probation and parole officers, violent extremism exit support groups, subject matter experts with networking abilities, DHS Regional Prevention Coordinators, and fusion centers.

Challenge:

- Many professionals remain unfamiliar with terms like “targeted violence” and “violent extremism,” and therefore decline to find this content relevant to their work.

Additional Challenges and Considerations:

- Probationers may not recognize the importance of their participation and feedback in research endeavors and are often focused on their own basic needs and meeting the requirements of community supervision.
- Probation officers and behavioral health professionals may not recognize or understand their connection to “targeted violence” and how it relates to their work and/or clientele and may therefore fail to pass along the survey to potential participants.
- There may be concerns about liability and the optics of participation in a project related to violent extremism.
- Probation and parole officers may find benefit in providing this survey to their clients and having conversations in vivo about their treatment needs, community supervision and management expectations, and ways to increase the likelihood of successfully completing probation or parole (ie. managing their behavior through effective coping strategies). Officers may see the utility in having clients complete the survey to frame a conversation around decreasing their risk for recidivism.
- Probation officers who are contacted about completing the training and survey should also be provided with information about the client survey and encouraged to offer it to their clientele.

RESULTS

The study results enabled us to elaborate the underlying logic for the intervention as described below:

Logic model

Input	Outputs	Short term outcomes	Long term outcomes	Overall Goal
Development of training material on DBT tailored to probation officers (blinded approach).	Increased availability of trainings tailored to probation officers with a focus on DBT.	Increased awareness about DBT.	FOR PROBATION OFFICERS	IMPROVED COMMUNITY SECURITY AND SAFETY
Checklists and practical tools to be used by the officers.	Increased engagement of key agencies in offering the training.	Increased use of tools and techniques to support clients with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tasks management skills - Time management skills - De-escalation skills 	Improved officers’ ability to recognize clients that could benefit from DBT treatment and perform appropriate referral.	
Officers’ recruitment				

<p>mechanisms through DHS Regional Prevention Coordinators (RPC's), State Sex Offender Management Boards and Domestic Violence Offender Management Boards, Terrorism Liaison Officers (TLO's) through state fusion centers.</p> <p>Training approved through Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) certification for probation officers who are law enforcement officials.</p> <p>Training approved for continuing education credits for behavioral health providers (American Psychological Association, National Association of</p>	<p>Increased number of officers trained in DBT.</p> <p>Increased availability of DBT referrals (specificity of the referrals request).</p>	<p>- Detailed safety planning</p> <p>Increased referrals to therapists with expertise in DBT.</p>	<p>Improved officers' ability to conduct case management.</p> <p>SYSTEM LEVEL</p> <p>Improved access to mental health services with specificity to DBT when needed.</p> <p>CLIENT LEVEL</p> <p>Improved success in following requirements of probation (reduced violation of probation terms)</p> <p>Improved ability to manage tasks in daily life (breakdown the tasks)</p> <p>Improved client's access and use of appropriate and detailed safety plans.</p>	
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Social Workers). Engagement of federal, state, and/or local probation departments. Availability of mental health providers trained in DBT and CVE. Availability of referral processes.			Reduced self harm and harm to others.	
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CONCLUSION

This study focused on the evaluability of the use of DBT for individuals with a history of engagement in criminal extremism who are under probation. To conduct an evaluation study on DBT it is necessary to enhance access to this therapeutic approach. Probation officers are key actors in ensuring access to psychological interventions because they can initiate referrals for their clients. Given the fact that probation officers typically lack training in DBT, any evaluation study on such intervention in the probation setting should first include an intervention to raise awareness about DBT among the officers themselves. Our study showed that when probation officers are made aware of DBT techniques they judge them as relevant and potentially useful for this type of client. In addition, DBT has proven to be effective to reduce self-harm and suicide, and both behaviors are present in this population. This study produced a logic model focused on potential outcomes of DBT interventions at the system, probation officer, and client level and practical considerations on how to recruit probation officers and clients for a full-scale evaluation study on the usefulness and effectiveness of DBT.

LIMITATIONS

We acknowledge several limitations in our study. Firstly, we interviewed mental health providers and surveyed probation officers using a convenience sample through snowball sampling, rather than a representative sample of this population. Secondly, our evaluability assessment focused only on two aspects of this process intervention design and recruitment efforts for a full-scale evaluation. Lastly, our literature review had limitations: we lacked access to evaluation reports

for government agencies, excluded non-English literature, and may have missed unpublished evaluations with negative results.

PARTICIPANTS AND OTHER COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS

Not applicable

EXPECTED APPLICABILITY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Three crucial recommendations emerge from our interviews with and survey of probation and parole officers:

- It is plausible to further explore the use of DBT for criminal extremists under probation
- To ensure adequate access and referral processes it is important to train probation officers on the usefulness of DBT
- Evaluation studies are plausible and should focus on the impact of the adoption of DBT for this population of clients at the system level (focusing on enhanced access and improved referral processes), probation officer level (improved case management), and client level (reduction of self-harm and harm to others, improved compliance with daily tasks and probation terms).

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