

Disguised Compliance Risks in Countering Violent Extremism Programming

This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.

Source article

Adrian Cherney and Daniel Koehler, "Understanding and Addressing the Risk of Disguised Compliance in CVE Programming," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 17, no. 4 (2025): 498–516, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2023.2286966>.

Key Takeaways

- Not all disguised compliance is malicious. Motivations range from a desire to please to deliberate deception. As a result, the indicators of disguised compliance vary considerably.
- Understanding the reasons behind a client's disguised compliance—such as seeking to test staff, protect themselves, or minimize the appearance of extremist beliefs—is essential for developing an effective engagement strategy.
- Practitioners should consider the full pattern of a client's behavior; consider their personality, motivations, and context; and treat any potential signs of disguised compliance as a prompt for careful investigation rather than definitive proof.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Programs designed to prevent violent extremism often rely on the idea that participants are honestly engaging and changing. However, practitioners have long worried that some individuals participating in countering violent extremism (CVE) programs¹ may display *disguised compliance*, meaning they appear cooperative without making meaningful shifts in attitudes or risk. This concern is rooted in several high-profile cases in which individuals committed acts of terrorism even though they had previously participated in rehabilitation or deradicalization programs. Examples include the 2019 London Bridge stabbings and the 2020 Vienna attack.

The study sought to explore practitioners' perspectives on how disguised compliance is defined, recognized,

¹ CVE programs focus on preventing ideologically motivated violence. These programs include community outreach and engagement efforts, awareness building, counternarratives, and interventions designed to divert individuals off the pathway to violence before criminal activity occurs.

and managed; it also included signs to watch for and strategies to assess genuine client change.

Methodology

The researchers interviewed 24 subject matter experts who had experience working in CVE-related roles. These participants included practitioners, program staff, and others with direct knowledge of disengagement and intervention processes. The interviews focused on participants' professional observations and experiences with cases involving suspected disguised compliance.

In analyzing the interviews, the researchers carefully reviewed the responses to identify common themes and patterns. They relied on assessing practitioners' descriptions, examples, and reflections of past clients rather than measuring client behavior with an experiment.

Findings

- **Disguised compliance exists on a spectrum and is often ambiguous.** Experts explained that disguised compliance ranges from deliberate deception to behaviors motivated by a desire to please—meaning that not all disguised compliance is malicious.

- **Disguised compliance might be a problem, but it needs to be put into perspective.** Interviewees emphasized that understanding why a client may engage in disguised compliance (to test staff, protect themselves, follow instructions, align with extremist beliefs, etc.) is key, and practitioners should balance optimism about change with healthy skepticism to avoid being totally misled.
- **There is no single behavior that proves disguised compliance.** Research has shown that many behaviors can signal disguised compliance but that none are guaranteed indicators on their own. Experts emphasized that practitioners need to look at the full pattern of a client's behavior; consider their personality, motivations, and context; and treat any potential signs as a prompt for careful investigation rather than definitive proof. Table 1 shows example warning signs.
- **A mix of strategies is needed to detect and reduce disguised compliance.** Practitioners should combine approaches, such as the practices listed in Table 2. Building rapport and trust is also essential. Through strong relationships, practitioners can build a foundation of openness and honesty that encourages authentic dialogue.

Table 1. Indicators of disguised compliance

- ! Making sudden claims of having changed
- ! Being highly reactive to questions
- ! Making contradictory statements or displaying inconsistencies between words and actions
- ! Being difficult to contact or unable to maintain consistent appointments
- ! Deflecting, evading, or redirecting discussion of certain issues, including through overelaborating

- ! Shifting from being highly resistant to being overly cooperative
- ! Downplaying the need for responsibility
- ! Demonstrating compliance even while rejecting and criticizing the CVE program
- ! Attempting to generate tension or conflict between stakeholders involved in their care
- ! Displaying sudden behavioral changes

Source: Cherney and Koehler, "Understanding and Addressing the Risk of Disguised Compliance," 498–516.

Table 2. Strategies and practices to minimize and detect disguised compliance

✓ Working as a team in direct intervention	✓ Ensuring behaviors are consistent across contexts
✓ Employing third-party supervision and oversight	✓ Taking client relapses (i.e., re-engagement with extremism) seriously
✓ Debriefing with the team after client interactions	✓ Taking first responses at face value
✓ Checking against different information sources	✓ Engaging family members
✓ Asking the same question in different ways and across different contexts	✓ Testing for certain personality traits
✓ Conducting ongoing assessments of the quality of client engagement	

Source: Cherney and Koehler, "Understanding and Addressing the Risk of Disguised Compliance," 498–516.

How can practitioners working in early-stage intervention and threat assessment use these findings?

- Approach the individual of concern with empathy. Use nonjudgmental dialogue to emphasize their autonomy, reduce their defensiveness, and ensure they don't feel pressured to appear compliant.
- Tailor interventions to the individual and remain flexible. Programs that rigidly enforce expectations may unintentionally incentivize individuals to mimic compliance to satisfy authority figures.
- Collaborate on interviews because different types of practitioners receive different interview training. For example, many practitioners can benefit from training on behavioral cues or on the interviewing techniques investigators use to detect deception and encourage truth-telling.
- Prioritize building rapport and trust with clients. A strong relationship is a critical foundation for openness and honesty.
- Engage families and community members to promote prosocial engagement; assess whether reported changes align with behavior across settings.

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