

What Works? The Perspectives of US Extremists on Reintegration Programs

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

Jessica E. Stern, Megan K. McBride, Jessa L. Mellea, and Elena Savoia, "Practices and Needs in Reintegration Programs for Violent Extremist Offenders in the United States: The Extremist Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (May 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2204668>.

Key Takeaways

- Most of the violent extremist offenders interviewed were unsatisfied with the mental health treatment they had received. The interviewees were particularly sensitive to the possibility that their clinicians were afraid of them, ambivalent in their commitment to providing care, and morally judgmental of their choices.
- Some probation conditions conflicted with employment requirements and family needs, making reintegration more difficult. Programs that place conditions on participant behavior should actively consider, and continuously reassess, the costs and benefits of each condition to avoid imposing counterproductive restrictions.
- The number of licensed mental health providers willing to, and capable of, working with extremist populations is inadequate. State and county policy-makers and nonprofits should consider supporting specialized clinician-led training to grow this cohort of professionals.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Since 9/11, many violent extremists prosecuted for terrorism-related crimes have been released from prison and placed on probation in the United States. Among them are individuals associated with international and domestic terrorist movements who have been charged with a variety of violent and nonviolent crimes. As this population grows, more research is needed to understand how to safely and effectively help this population reintegrate into society and prevent them from returning to extremist activities or other crimes.

The US lacks a formal program for reintegrating violent extremists, and it offers no specialized services targeted to this subpopulation. Instead, released extremists get a mix of services (e.g., job training, therapy, housing assistance) that are often designed for non-extremist criminals. As a result, it is difficult to identify which services might work best for this unique group.

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Methodology

The researchers interviewed 17 former violent extremists who had been released from prison or had been on probation in the US. These individuals were referred to the research team by probation officers or non-governmental organizations working in deradicalization. The researchers used open-ended interview questions to let participants share their experiences regarding the criminal justice system, reintegration programs, the deradicalization process, and mental health treatment. The researchers also interviewed probation officers, including some who were supervising the extremist interviewees. The probation officer perspectives are captured in a companion article.*

Findings

- **Building rapport may be critical for reducing recidivism.** Many former extremists said that having a trusting relationship with a probation officer, prison official, or other authority figure was key to their successful reintegration. Random acts of kindness and empathy helped them feel supported and motivated them to maintain that trusting relationship.
- **Mental health treatment is often inadequate.** Most interviewees had a history of mental health issues but were unsatisfied with the therapy they had received in prison or after release. Some therapists were perceived to be untrained or uncomfortable working with extremists, and access to therapists could be erratic and inconsistent (with infrequent meetings and multiple provider changes).



* Jessica E. Stern, Megan K. McBride, Adam Baker, Marley Carroll, and Elena Savoia, "Practices and Needs in Reintegration Programs for Violent Extremist Offenders in the United States: The Probation Officer Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 48, no. 10 (2025): 1057–1078, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2163460>.

- **Probation conditions can be counterproductive.** Some former extremists found that probation requirements such as travel restrictions, irrelevant job training (e.g., for blue collar jobs despite their white collar pre-conviction backgrounds), computer monitoring, and frequent drug tests made it difficult for them to meet benchmarks required for successful reintegration, especially when these conditions conflicted with employment requirements or family needs.
- **Of the 17 interviewees, 3 described feeling an “addiction” to hate.** They described their involvement in hate or extremism as addictive, like substance abuse. They said certain people, places, and situations could trigger a return to old ways of thinking.
- **Solitary confinement causes long-term harm.** Six interviewees reported spending long periods in solitary confinement—an experience linked to anxiety, depression, and trouble reintegrating into society. Most did not receive consistent mental health support during or after solitary confinement.

How can deradicalization and reintegration practitioners, probation officers, and case workers use these findings?

- Clinicians should note that violent extremist offenders were particularly sensitive to the possibility that their clinicians were afraid of them, ambivalent in their commitment to providing care, and morally judgmental of their choices.
- State and county policy-makers and nonprofits should consider supporting training for this cohort of professionals. Specialized training designed and delivered by clinicians for clinicians (not just a broad overview of violent extremism) is essential.
- Programs that place conditions on participant behavior (e.g., school safety plans requirements, probation requirements, reintegration program participation conditions) should actively consider, and continuously reassess, the costs and benefits of each condition to avoid imposing conditions that impede with the ultimate goal of successful reintegration.

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