

Pathways to Change: Learning from the Community Integration Support Program

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

Ramón Spaaij, Muhammad Iqbal, Andrew Zammit, Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi, and Debra Smith, "An Evidence-Informed Theory of Change for Facilitating Disengagement from Violent Extremism: Insights from the Community Integration Support Program," *Journal for Deradicalization* 43 (2025): 1–31, <https://journal-derad.com/index.php/jd/article/view/1047>.

Key Takeaways

- Countering violent extremism (CVE) programs should be culturally appropriate, tailored to individual needs, delivered by skilled and empathetic staff who are trained in relationship development, and based on a holistic approach to intervention.
- Disengagement and reintegration are nonlinear processes that may require significant time, and clients will require consistent support throughout the process. Short-term goals must be distinguished from long-term outcomes. Setbacks occur, and change may happen unevenly.
- Practitioners should build relationships with clients, use culturally appropriate practices, involve families, ensure timelines are flexible, and leverage logic models to assess and refine their programs to ensure effectiveness.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

CVE programs exist around the world, but how and why these programs work has not been sufficiently studied. Many previous studies have shown that CVE programs can help people disengage from terrorism and violent extremism, but these studies often do not explain the specific steps or program components that lead to success. As a result, practitioners lack guidance about which interventions to use for which circumstances and how to improve their efforts.

This research intended to fill this gap by developing and testing a clear, evidence-based theory of change for the Community Integration Support Program (CISP), which is the longest running CVE program in Australia. The study asked the question, What are the main program features that help CISP achieve its goal of helping clients disengage from terrorism and violent extremism?

The DVERT Center is supported by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice under Award No. 15PNIJ-24-GK-00750-DOMR. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Methodology

The researchers combined interviews and client assessments to fully understand what influences engagement in the CISP. They spoke with 52 key people, including 24 current or former CISP clients and other stakeholders (such as staff and mentors). The researchers thematically analyzed the interview transcripts to identify key patterns and themes. They also analyzed assessments and progress reports for 35 CISP clients, focusing on client progress from year to year.

Findings

Based on the data, the researchers found that CVE programs should have the following four characteristics:

1. Be delivered in a **culturally appropriate** way
2. Have staff with **good interpersonal skills**
3. Use **interventions that are tailored** to individual client needs
4. Employ a **holistic approach** to intervention

In analyzing the client assessments, the researchers found that **CISP helped participants make progress** toward disengagement and reintegration. However, they also found that **this process takes time and is non-linear**, with change occurring unevenly across core domains (i.e., social relations, coping, identity, ideology, and action orientation).

These findings informed a theory of change (right) and a program logic model (Figure 1).

CISP Theory of Change

"If religious and human **mentoring** and social and clinical **support** are provided by **trusted and skilled staff** in a **culturally appropriate** manner **tailored** to participants' needs,

then participants will develop **meaningful engagement** in the program over time and have access to appropriate support services,

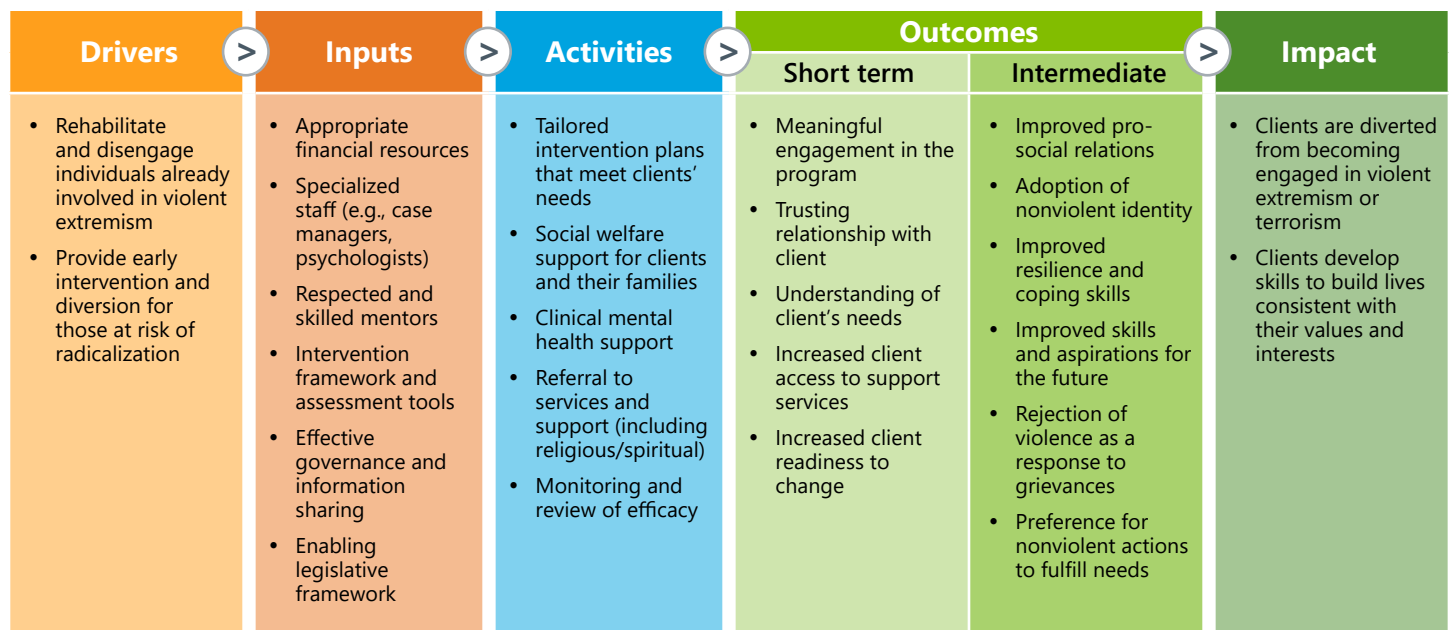
leading to **diversion** from becoming involved in violent extremism or **disengagement** from violent extremism, resulting in desistance from terrorist offending,

because participants will develop: increased pro-social relations; stronger non-violent identity; greater coping ability, skills, and aspirations; increased rejection of the legitimacy of violence in response to grievances; and preference towards non-violent action to fulfill their needs."

Source: Spaaij et al., "An Evidence-Informed Theory of Change," 1–31.



Figure 1. CISP logic model



Source: Adapted from Spaaij et al., "An Evidence-Informed Theory of Change," 1–31.

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

- Foster trust by building strong, empathetic relationships between practitioners and participants.
- Be aware that being "culturally appropriate" means working within that culture, not against it.
- Include family-focused components to strengthen support systems and address relational dynamics critical to reintegration.
- Implement adaptable timelines for progress that account for individual challenges and unique circumstances.
- Employ logic models to evaluate program effectiveness and ensure that programs align with participant needs; refine interventions based on outcomes and feedback.

About CNA

The CNA Corporation (CNA) is a not-for-profit analytical organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. Nearly 700 CNA scientists, analysts, and professionals provide data-driven, innovative solutions to complex problems. It operates the Center for Naval Analyses—the Department of the Navy's federally funded research and development center (FFRDC)—as well as the Institute for Public Research, which supports federal, state, and local government officials advancing national and homeland security.

To learn more about the DVERT Center, contact our team at dvert@cna.org.

Any copyright in this work is subject to the Government's Unlimited Rights license. The reproduction of this work for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited. Nongovernmental users may copy and distribute this document noncommercially, in any medium, provided that the copyright notice is reproduced in all copies. Nongovernmental users may not use technical measures to obstruct or control the reading or further copying of the copies they make or distribute. Nongovernmental users may not accept compensation of any manner in exchange for copies. All other rights reserved. This report may contain hyperlinks to websites and servers maintained by third parties. CNA does not control, evaluate, endorse, or guarantee content found in those sites. We do not assume any responsibility or liability for the actions, products, services, and content of those sites or the parties that operate them.

CNA® is a registered trademark of The CNA Corporation and may not be used without prior written authorization.