



Federal Probation Officer Perspectives on Supervising Violent Extremist Releasees

Key Takeaways

- Federal probation officers face a critical shortage of mental health providers who are trained and willing to treat clients with a history of violent extremism.
- Officers frequently override the standard recidivism risk tool because they believe it underestimates the danger posed by violent extremist offenders.
- A lack of consensus on how to define recidivism has complicated the work of estimating recidivism rates for this population, leaving officers to rely on personal impressions rather than evidence.
- Investments in training mental health providers to work with this population, and formalizing guidance for probation officers working with this population, are critical as the number of violent extremist releasees grows.

Why This Matters

The number of people with a history of violent extremism in US prisons or on probation is growing, but the federal probation system has no formal, extremism-specific strategy for helping these offenders reintegrate into society. Officers are left to manage a high-stakes population using tools and programs that were built for general criminal offenders rather than for people individuals by ideology.

Programs designed to facilitate the deradicalization, disengagement, and reintegration of violent extremists are expanding around the world, but very few have been formally evaluated to determine if they are effective. A systematic literature review published in 2021 summarized the existing evidence for tertiary intervention—programs designed to disengage those who have committed acts of violent extremism—and found that over half of the programs (10 of 18) were associated with mostly positive outcomes. Also in 2021, a review focused specifically on the Netherlands found that the existing written knowledge base on what works was still quite limited.

This study fills a gap in that evidence base by examining, for the first time, how US federal probation officers manage extremist offenders day-to-day and what resources they say they need to do that job well.

How the Study Worked

The research team interviewed 39 federal probation officers across 27 districts between June 2020 and April 2021, asking about their caseloads, the risk assessment tools they use, how they monitor clients, what services are available, and what training they feel they need. They also surveyed 206 officers, 73 percent of whom had experience supervising violent extremists, to assess whether the patterns found in the interviews held across a larger group.

Combining interviews with a follow-up survey provides a more reliable picture than either method alone. The interviews allowed officers to describe their experiences in their own words and in depth, while the survey confirmed whether those same patterns appeared across a much larger group of officers nationwide. This combination helps rule out the possibility that what officers described in interviews was unusual to just a few people.

What Was Learned

- **Officers frequently override the results of their risk assessment tool.** The Post Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA) is the standard tool officers use to judge an offender's risk of reoffending, but it was designed to assess common criminals, not violent extremists. Almost 70 percent of officers who discussed the PCRA said they override its results because they believe it underestimates the risk posed by extremist offenders.
- **Officers identified rapport with the client as a key to success.** Rapport between the officer and client was mentioned in 100 percent of interviews, with officers emphasizing the importance of striking a balance between understanding and accountability.
- **Mental health care for this population is hard to find.** Mental health treatment, especially cognitive behavioral therapy, was discussed in nearly all interviews, and officers were strongly supportive of its use. However, officers also said there is a shortage of providers who are both trained and willing to work with extremist clients.
- **Officers believe extremist offenders reoffend often.** Officers expressed a generally pessimistic view about reoffending—though not necessarily violent extremism reoffending—with one estimating that about two in ten extremist offenders end up back in prison and another suggesting that “most” return to prison as a result of violating the terms of their probation.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest message for policymakers is that the tools and support structures currently available to federal probation officers were not built with violent extremist offenders in mind. Officers are filling these gaps themselves, overriding standardized risk scores and trying to find mental health providers willing to take on extremist cases, often without formal guidance. Systemic interventions—investments in training mental health providers to work with this population, formalizing guidance for probation officers working with this population, and providing federal probation officers with evidence-based training on recidivism—are critical as this subpopulation of releasees grows.

Source article

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