LIMITED REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE EVALUATION OF P/CVE PROGRAMMING

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A wide variety of programs, activities, and interventions could be considered preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs. As a 2016 evaluation of a US CVE initiative in New Jersey argued, some efforts can best be described as *CVE-relevant programs* if they are "not necessarily labeled as CVE programming per se, but [are] intended to produce outcomes that are theoretically linked to factors (reported in peer-reviewed literature) associated with preemption of violent extremism" (Williams et al., 2016). Other efforts, per a 2020 evaluation of CVE efforts in Massachusetts, are better described as *CVE-adjacent programs*. Like CVE-relevant programs, those in this category are not necessarily labeled as CVE, and they aspire to produce outcomes associated with the prevention of violent extremism; however, they are "not necessarily supported by peer-reviewed literature or rigorous evaluation" (Savoia et al., 2020). The authors noted the following:

> [These programs] may develop organically and intuitively (with input from local leaders), and will continue to be funded regardless of whether or not empirical evidence supports the work they propose (because local communities will move forward with programs that feel helpful, even if there is no evidence to suggest that they will help with the particular problem being targeted).

As a result, the domestic P/CVE landscape includes programs that focus on a wide range of issues, including educational outreach, life skills development, messaging campaigns (both awareness building and counter-narrative), and exit and rehabilitation services (Fisher & Busher, 2024). This diversity is further complicated by the fact that these programs can focus on any type of extremism (e.g., nationalist, religious), any stage of the radicalization process, and a variety of potential clients (e.g., adults, children) (Jugl et al., 2021). This variability in what constitutes a P/CVE program makes establishing best practices for evaluating P/CVE programming challenging. Nevertheless, evaluating P/CVE programs[1] is important for the following reasons:

- Many of these programs are directly funded by the government.
- These programs are designed to prevent or counter acts of violence, so there is a high cost of *not* implementing effective programs and of implementing *ineffective* programs.
- These programs are "at risk of being suddenly and massively politicized" (Baykal et al., 2021), thus there is value in having routinized, repeatable, documented, and ongoing evaluation in place before a program gains political attention.
- Robust evaluation is the standard across a wide variety of public health and other governmental programs (Centers for Disease Control, 1999; Department of Defense, 2017; Office of Management and Budget, 2020).

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[1] In this paper, we define *program evaluation* as systematic data collection and analysis of programs, policies, and organizations to assess effectiveness (Government Accountability Office, 2021). This definition is meant to broadly encompass programs and interventions across the spectrum of P/CVE: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention.

In this limited review of the literature, we focus primarily on four systematic reviews that have sought to document the current state of published and unpublished P/CVE evaluations (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Jugl et al., 2020; McBride et al., 2022; Pistone et al., 2019). Relying on these reviews, we first describe the current status of P/CVE evaluations. Then, we discuss challenges in P/CVE evaluations. Finally, we provide literature-informed recommendations for conducting these evaluations.

CURRENT STATUS OF P/CVE EVALUATIONS

Multiple scholars in the field of P/CVE evaluations have noted the dearth of research describing robust evaluations and their results, and although the designs and search criteria of the four systematic reviews varied (e.g., international or US, published sources only or inclusion of grey literature, type of interventions included, analysis techniques), each found similarly small numbers of empirical evaluations of P/CVE programs (Dorme et al., 2022; Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Jugl et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2020; McBride et al., 2022).

The lack of evaluations has made determining the effects, underlying mechanisms, and costs of multiple P/CVE programs unclear (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015). It has also made drawing conclusions about which program and evaluation features should be replicated difficult (McBride, 2022). Furthermore, Lewis et al. (2020) conducted a review of P/CVE programs to describe the types, methods, and challenges facing the programs and noted that "the most significant limitation is the lack of evaluative work carried out to date" (p. 5).

In addition to the insufficient quantity of evaluations, multiple scholars have noted that quality is lacking. One systematic literature review on P/CVE evaluations found that one out of every four sources did not report clear evaluation methods and that, although the authors made recommendations, it was unclear how they arrived at their conclusions based on the evaluations (Dorme et al., 2022). Other systematic reviews have similarly noted that P/CVE evaluations generally lack empirical comparisons across programs or a control sample (i.e., one that does not receive the intervention) and are anecdotal or theoretical (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Jugl et al., 2020; McBride et al., 2022; Pistone et al., 2019).

CHALLENGES WITH CURRENT P/CVE EVALUATIONS

Thorough program evaluation is difficult because P/CVE programs are often complex and have multiple stakeholders. Moreover, P/CVE programs—like other difficult-to-evaluate programs (e.g., sexual assault prevention, criminal recidivism prevention)—come with the following additional challenges:

- Violent extremist acts are rare and thus difficult to use as outcome metrics for P/CVE evaluations (Lewis et al., 2020; McBride et al., 2022; Pistone et al., 2019).
- The goal of P/CVE programs is to intervene before a violent event happens and prevent it from ever occurring, but it is difficult to demonstrate that a P/CVE program prevented a violent act that never happened (Fisher & Busher, 2023).
- When evaluating a P/CVE program, it is difficult to determine that the program (not some unmeasured factor) was the primary cause of any change in behavior or attitude among participants (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Lewis et al., 2020).
- P/CVE programs vary widely on a number of critical issues, including the objectives of the programs, the interventions they deploy, how they define *radicalization*, and which antecedents to committing VE they target (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Jugl et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2020; Pistone et al., 2019).
- There is a lack of agreement on metrics to use in evaluating P/CVE programs (Lewis et al., 2020; McBride et al., 2022).
- Gaining access to participants who have used (or could use) a P/CVE program and gaining access to data about those participants is difficult because of security and ethical concerns (e.g., identifying or stigmatizing participants) and a lack of comprehensive data recording (Lewis et al., 2020; McBride et al., 2022).
- Given the imperative to prevent and counter violent extremism, withholding an intervention that might be effective from an at-risk or already radicalized group of people is politically difficult and ethically challenging (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Lewis et al., 2020; Pistone et al., 2019).

- P/CVE programs and evaluations need to be careful not to further stigmatize or discriminate against already marginalized groups because doing so might be counterproductive (Malet, 2021; Pistone et al., 2019).
- Context and nuance of the populations and situations related to violent extremism are important to document and analyze when determining the efficacy of a P/CVE program because they may affect engagement and disengagement with VE (Lewis et al., 2020; Malet, 2021). However, accounting for context and differences in circumstances across evaluations makes drawing robust conclusions about a program more difficult.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE P/CVE EVALUATIONS

Although there is no simple solution to the challenge of evaluating P/CVE programs, there are some promising recommendations within the existing literature.

Appreciating process evaluations in the near term

Most of the available P/CVE evaluations are process evaluations (Fisher & Busher, 2024). Although scholars and policy-makers in the field have called for more outcome evaluations, process evaluations are important because they can help evaluators understand *why* a program is effective—to understand *what is and what is not working* in a P/CVE program. Williams (2022) argued that "understanding why a program is (or is not) working as well as expected is the backbone of evidence-based P/CVE program design" (p. 262). Baykal et al. (2021) concurred: "For a field as young as P/CVE, it is more important to determine what works and learn from mistakes than to use evaluation as a tool to punish implementers and funders for measures that did not have the desired effect." Although maximizing accountability is important, learning should not be stifled in a field that currently lacks standard definitions, validated methods, and homogeneous populations and program objectives.

Strengthening evaluation designs

Two aspects of P/CVE evaluations are consistently discussed in the literature as mechanisms to increase the strength of conclusions drawn from analysis: (1) using mixed methods and triangulating data (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Lewis et al., 2020) and (2) basing evaluations on a theory of change (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Fisher & Busher, 2023; Wooten, 2014). Using mixed methods involves gathering both quantitative and qualitative data that can allow the evaluator to test for statistical significance and better understand the context to which the evaluation applies. Using theories of change (or logic models) allows the evaluator to understand and describe how inputs, activities, and outputs relate to the outcomes of a program. Theories of change can allow evaluators to develop testable claims and more precisely examine them (Fisher & Busher, 2023).

Techniques to overcome known challenges

In our limited review of the literature, we identified two methodological techniques that could be used to overcome widely recognized challenges in P/CVE evaluation. First, to address ethical issues regarding withholding treatment to at-risk persons, P/CVE evaluators could consider additional options to traditional control (no-treatment) groups. One option is to create a "dynamic waitlist" in which random groups of participants are moved from the control condition to the treatment condition throughout the duration of the evaluation (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Lewis et al., 2020). Another option is called "switching replication." In this option, throughout the duration of the evaluation, all participants are at one point in the control condition (i.e., no treatment) and at another point in the treatment condition (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Lewis et al., 2020). The benefit of both options is that all participants will eventually receive the treatment, which is not true of traditional randomized control trials.

Second, P/CVE evaluators could expand the types of outcomes they consider resulting from P/CVE programs. Doing so would help compensate for the low base rate of violent extremist acts and help demonstrate that programs are effective (even if this effectiveness is not immediately obvious because they prevent events that did not happen). Cherney (2022) described the following socioecological

outcomes that could be considered: increased family involvement; increased family participation in prevention activities; increased school attendance, school engagement, and participation in school activities; and decreased violent tendencies. Each of these outcomes is observable and measurable in pre- and post-intervention measures.

Alternative evaluation paradigms

Finally, in addition to strengthening common evaluation practices, researchers should consider applying two less frequently used evaluation paradigms to P/CVE evaluations. First, recognizing that the context in which the P/CVE program is applied is important, some scholars advocate for the use of a realistic evaluation framework because it considers many aspects of the context and environment in which the program is implemented (Fisher & Busher, 2023; Pistone et al., 2019).[2] Second, Malet (2021) described the similarities between P/CVE evaluations and educational evaluations, noting that many P/CVE programs are trying to convey knowledge or skills in an attempt to modify attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors. Using an educational evaluation paradigm, P/CVE evaluators could examine the outcomes of knowledge and skill acquisition in addition to subsequent behaviors.

In short, evaluating P/CVE programs remains difficult, and there is no panacea to overcome the challenges facing researchers. That said, even a limited review of the existing literature makes clear that evaluations could be strengthened or improved through a number of mechanisms.

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[2] A *realistic evaluation* is one that prioritizes "explaining why, for whom and in what circumstances an intervention works." The primary goal of this approach is "to uncover the mechanisms that lead to observed outcomes following an intervention and the contextual conditions that enabled this" (Renmans & Castellano Pleguezuelo, 2023).

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