



“Deradicalization Programs: Lessons from the United States”

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Honorable members of the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee in the
Australian Senate,

It is my pleasure to contribute to the inquiry that the Committee is conducting into right-wing
extremist movements in Australia.

As requested, my submission will focus on deradicalization programs. Specifically, I will draw
from the experience of two programs pioneered in the United States of America by the Counter
Extremism Project (CEP) with funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS),
*Alternative Pathways: Rehabilitation and Reintegration for Those with Extremism-Related
Convictions* and *The Radicalization, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, and Recidivism Network (4R
Network)*. Lessons learned from their design, management, and implementation will allow me to
outline a series of key elements that should be included in any deradicalization program developed
in Australia to target individuals involved in right-wing extremism, or to adapt any existing
Australian deradicalization initiatives so that they meet the needs of individuals seeking to leave
right-wing extremist movements.

Right-wing extremism has existed in Australia since the interwar period.¹ Yet, as increasingly
younger individuals engage with right-wing extremist movements, ideologies diversify, and online
spaces continue to develop as a means of connecting individuals who can disseminate, socialize,
and access extremist attitudes, narratives, and beliefs, it is important to understand the multiplicity
of factors that drive and sustain engagement to right-wing extremism.² Deradicalization programs
present an opportunity to gather first-hand information on the motivations that underlie
engagement in said movements and develop evidence-based practices that create sustained
resilience against violent worldviews.

¹ Andrew Moore, *The Right Road: A History of Right-wing Politics in Australia* (Oxford University Press, 1995);
Andy Fleming and Aurelien Mondon, “The Radical Right in Australia”, in Jens Rydgren (ed.) *The Oxford
Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford UP, 2018).

² Peucker, M. (2023). Demarcating Australia’s far right: political fringe but social mainstream?; Campion, K.
(2024). Right-Wing Extremism in Australia: Current Threats and Trends in a Diverse and Diffuse Threatscape.
Counter Terrorist Trends & Analysis, 16(3).



What are deradicalization programs?

Deradicalization initiatives are programs aimed at persuading people to leave violent extremist groups and to reduce the chances that individuals re-engage with violent extremism in the future. Such programs usually focus on two interrelated processes:

- Disengagement, or halting an individual's involvement in extremist *behavior*.³
- Deradicalization, or a psychological and cognitive process by which the individual experiences a fundamental change in *understanding* and *belief*, and that does not necessarily go hand in hand with disengagement.⁴

All in all, these purposefully planned interventions aim to change the personal characteristics of individuals that are believed to underlie the motivations for engagement (i.e., attitudes, cognitive skills and processes, personality or mental health, and social, educational, or vocational skills) to ensure that individuals proceed to live a law-abiding, productive life.⁵

Deradicalization programs in the U.S.: *Alternative Pathways* and the *4R Network*

Alternative Pathways is the first U.S. program that provides pre- and post-release resources and support to individuals convicted of a targeted violence or terrorism-related offense, or to those who are at risk for terrorism and targeted violence while in correctional facilities, and links in-prison services to post-release rehabilitation and reintegration services to reduce recidivism.

Despite the focus on tertiary prevention, or a long-term approach that takes place *after* an individual has engaged in violence, it is worth noting that *Alternative Pathways* was designed:

- To address the novel, yet impending, threat posed by the release from incarceration of the majority of the almost 400 individuals prosecuted for terrorism-related offenses after 9/11;
- In a context in which there were no formal national rehabilitation and re-entry programs for convicted terrorists in the U.S. and little, if any, developed infrastructure to support individuals upon their release;
- To address the needs of and the threat posed by incarcerated individuals affiliated with right-wing extremist movements, but are not convicted for terrorism-related offenses due to the inexistence of legal statutes that allow for the prosecution of right-wing terrorism in the U.S.

In total, *Alternative Pathways* has thus far engaged 71 extremist offenders, 18 of them affiliated with right-wing extremist movements. One of the challenges to delivering post-release support to program participants was the lack of multisectoral communication amongst stakeholders involved in reintegration and rehabilitation processes, as post-release plans in the U.S. are prepared locally

³ Alonso, R. (2008). Leaving terrorism behind in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country: Reassessing anti-terrorist policies and the 'peace processes'. In *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (pp. 88-112). Horgan, J. G. (2009). *Walking away from terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements*.

⁴ Veldhuis, T. (2012). "Designing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders: A realist approach," International Center For Counter-Terrorism,

⁵ *Ibid.*



on a case-by-case basis by government actors disparate from federal prosecutor offices and probation services.

Thus, CEP followed the creation of *Alternative Pathways* with the *4R Network*, the first U.S.-based stakeholder network to facilitate a whole-of-society approach to extremist offender rehabilitation and reintegration. To date, the *4R Network* has brought together 137 professionals from over 12 different countries to exchange, discuss, and collaborate on advancing the rehabilitation and reintegration space for individuals involved in extremist movements, particularly for those whose involvement resulted in incarceration.

Lessons from the United States

Five key lessons can be drawn from the implementation of *Alternative Pathways* and the *4R Network*:

1) Develop a theory of change: A critical need exists to identify the multi-level mechanisms, obstacles, and facilitators for effectively and efficiently supporting the deradicalization and eventual rehabilitation of individuals affiliated with right-wing extremism in a way that reduces the risk of recidivism and enhances public safety. However, deradicalization-oriented programs are often implemented without an explicit theory of change (ToC). Absent or poorly designed ToCs risk advancing programming and interventions based on untested assumptions about what fosters change. Consequently, risking such interventions might in practice do more harm than good. Elaborating a theory of change can:

- Elucidate the complexity that has hindered efforts to understand the study of radicalization to violence, and deradicalization in general.
- Outline a multidisciplinary, evidence-backed framework that will facilitate better measuring and evaluation from the early stages of programming and as programming evolves in any jurisdiction or setting.
- Advance context-specific programming and supervision, and provide tailored services for individuals seeking to leave right-wing extremist movements.
- Detail how activities can promote a series of results in divergent spheres and life areas crucial to achieving the intended program goal.

2) Set clear goals: Traditionally, deradicalization initiatives are considered effective if they can alter an individual's beliefs and worldviews to align with what is considered mainstream. While the concern with deradicalization is understandable given the influence of ideology in engaging, recruiting, and mobilizing individuals to violence, scaling and measuring abstract ideas can prove difficult, and failing to distinguish between violent ideologies and ideas that, albeit radical, are nonetheless compatible with democratic values, may advance grievances concerning government infringement of individual rights and freedoms. Additionally, research in the field of terrorism studies has demonstrated that to achieve sustained disengagement from extremist groups, ideology is merely one of many issues that need addressing. To reduce the risk of re-engagement, foster legitimacy, and simultaneously promote reconciliation and long-term societal resilience against extremism and violence, deradicalization initiatives targeting individuals engaged in right-wing extremist movements should aim for:



- **Safety:** Personal safety means people live in conditions that promote positive mental and physical health, connectedness, and resilience. Hence, deradicalization programs targeting individuals engaged in right-wing extremist movements should focus on individual well-being while protecting against any physical or psychological harm caused by disengagement.
- **Health:** “Health” is usually equated to physical health and the understanding of “mental well-being” is mostly only correlated with obvious signs of emotional distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, etc.). However, defining and measuring personal health and wellness also requires focusing on a person’s social involvement (i.e., community integration). EXIT initiatives targeting individuals engaged in right-wing extremist movements should thus integrate emotional well-being as an essential part of disengagement efforts.
- **Dignity:** Radicalization into violence is preceded by perceptions of social alienation, which can emerge from a pattern of exclusion, humiliation, selective mistreatment, and prejudice towards groups or individuals by a community, the state and its institutions, or the wider society. To reduce the appeal of known pull factors linked to radicalization and reshape one’s worldview, perceptions of alienation are mitigated through strengthened community inclusion.

3) Advance a whole-of-society approach: Sociopolitical grievances are often at the heart of individual and group radicalization processes. Therefore, governments should not be at the forefront of any deradicalization initiative. However, this does not exclude government agencies and bodies, legislators, and policymakers from playing a key supportive and complementary role to a diverse range of civil society partners whom experts have recommended incorporating into any deradicalization program. These partners include psychologists, social workers, religious scholars, former violent extremists, aftercare experts, community leaders, family members, researchers, and even the private sector. Engaging with and including diverse partners in any deradicalization initiatives would allow for the creation of programs that can:

- **Identify, map, and assess national capacities:** Resources refer to existing programs, service providers and organizations, and all relevant stakeholders. While a broad range of international tools exists to frame prevention and radicalization initiatives, the design, implementation, and assessment of such programs are largely context-dependent—that is, limited by existing resources (financial, material, and human), national legislations, and the broader sociocultural dynamics that shape local and national interactions.
- **Gain a nuanced and complex understanding of the country's radicalization risk and protective factors:** Terminology like “transnationalization” or “internationalization” of right-wing extremism could make it seem like right-wing extremist movements are a uniform block. However, radicalization studies have identified that radicalization pathways are marked by complexities largely subject to setting events and circumstances. Thus, deradicalization programs can only be holistic if they incorporate awareness of the country and community dynamics that make right-wing extremist ideologies resonate with or appeal to individual citizens or larger communities. Yet, government actors alone are not best placed to identify or

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address issues that will first emerge at the local level and are often closely related to grievances that may lead to radicalization.

- Construct knowledge collectively, by taking up each stakeholder’s contributions and combining them into new insights. The purpose is to build cross-cutting relationships and enhanced expertise that guarantees every stakeholder working with extremist offenders in-prison and/or in-community in Australia has adequate knowledge and access to evidence-based reintegration support mechanisms.
- Enhance trust and credibility by developing tailored, context-appropriate responses: While robust threat assessment tools exist, evidence from the field of counterterrorism shows that there is no set terrorist profile. Thus, applying a blanket approach to deradicalization initiatives risks violating the “do-no-harm” principle and leading programs to be ineffective. The goal of a multidisciplinary approach to deradicalization programs is for civil society actors and government stakeholders to work with localized case managers who provide tailored support services and coordinate participant-centered care within the ecosystem of actors to address individual, familial, group, and broader societal needs.
- Develop innovative approaches: Deradicalization programs are often deficit-based, implicitly based on the notion that the problem of radicalization should be the focus of attention. However, a limited understanding of the defense mechanisms an extremist identity can put forth when confronted can hinder any ability to motivate individuals to make positive alterations. Rather, including expertise, knowledge, and evidence from fields beyond traditional security studies (including terrorism studies) can ensure that interventions are asset-based. This further facilitates identifying skills and interests and cultivating means and opportunities for putting personal assets forth in positive, prosocial, and healthy directions and contexts while helping individuals recognize the damage they can inflict on themselves or others when strengths are misdirected.
- Extended reach and engagement: As noted above, civil society organizations are better placed to access hard-to-reach communities and to identify their needs and challenges. They thus play a key role in monitoring, assessing, and adjusting all programs and their development. Their unique insights can help elevate the voices of those who may feel at odds with the broader community and ensure that all programs and policies are inclusive and foment social cohesion. The private sector should also be considered a key actor in these processes. While the private sector’s role is usually limited to the role that the tech sector can play in contributing to curtailing the threat posed by right-wing extremist groups’ use of online platforms, less is said about the private sector’s potential as funders or even providers of services that can meet the needs of individuals seeking to leave right-wing extremist movements, such as employment.
- Improved evaluations: Although the importance of evaluations is further discussed below, it is important to highlight how a whole-of-society approach can advance more comprehensive assessment at every stage of any deradicalization initiative. Moreover, by obtaining input from experts with different backgrounds and expertise allows for more detailed evaluations that



include both individual and societal aspects of each process and can thus paint a more detailed picture of potential threats, challenges, and opportunities.

- Effective policy discussions that lead to coordinated action: Multidisciplinary discussions and approaches, as well as comprehensive evaluations, can ensure not only that uniform policies, procedures, and processes are established, but also that these are evidence-based.

4) Apply a trauma- and countering violent extremism (TCVE) lens: One of the main criticisms of deradicalization initiatives is balancing recovery with the need to account for individual agency. By shifting the perspective away from “what’s wrong with you?” to “what happened to you?”, the trauma- and countering violent extremism (TCVE) framework implemented as part of *Alternative Pathways* and the *4R Network* programs expands the field of radicalization and extremism studies and practice to include structural and inter- and intrapersonal factors, thereby meeting the needs of individuals that differ in the degree of agency, role, commitment, drivers of radicalization, and other variables. Consistent with the current understanding of the complexities of radicalization, a trauma-informed approach seeks to understand why people are radicalized, looking at the trauma associated with radicalization drivers as well as the subsequent experiences in extremist movements, and incorporates an evolved understanding of the multitudinous effects of trauma and its links to health and behavior.

A TCVE-informed approach is most appropriate for understanding, unwinding, and reorienting the in-group/out-group bias that underlies extremist ideologies and how they create the scaffolding upon which extremist networks and movements fulfill social needs, offering not just an individual sense of purpose, meaning, and significance but a sense of social connection, community, and camaraderie. This acknowledges the basic needs of individuals radicalized into right-wing extremism and permits an intervention that addresses them with a constructive approach that creates holistic individual and social supports and an environment conducive to the transition of identity in a manner promotive of social cohesion. The TCVE approach can be applied to the main intervention areas addressed through deradicalization programs:

- Provide individual mental health and psychosocial support: A TCVE framework accounts for the intersecting impacts of systemic and interpersonal violence and structural inequities on a person’s life, past and present. Problems, therefore, are seen as residing in both their psychological state and social circumstances. Yet, while the TCVE paradigm does not suggest all extremists suffer from diagnosable trauma, it appreciates complexity and establishes a better client-centered system that can preserve dignity, establish trust and rapport, and acknowledge that experiences impact individual agency. This approach offers several advantages, including providing a means of facilitating effective engagement in programming, identifying disguised compliance or sustained extremist support, and determining specific intervention mechanisms likely to facilitate disengagement, while also enhancing the likelihood of full-fledged ‘deradicalization’ (thus reducing the risks of recidivism).
- Advance and connect socioeconomic and educational capital: Although decades of research in sociology, psychology, and criminology suggest the importance of prosocial bonds and a sense of belonging, and despite evidence from the realm of prisoner reentry suggesting the three



spheres (i.e., social, educational, and economic capital) are interconnected and can address unmet needs through personal development and self-improvement instruction, deradicalization initiatives often overlook how finding a new identity and self-narrative can facilitate openness to engagement with new prosocial networks. Thus, a TCVE-informed perspective for developing social, educational, and economic capital should expand beyond “finding people jobs” and be thought of as building in-community networks to advance social capital for generating new narratives of self and one’s relationship to the community.

- Promote family cohesion: Isolation and its effects play a multifaceted role in involvement processes and initial engagement phases of radicalization.⁶ However, radicalization into violence should also be understood as a group socialization process through which people develop identification with a set of norms—whether violent or nonviolent—through *situated social interactions* that leverage their shared perceptions and experiences.⁷ Hence, international guidelines and tools aimed at facilitating the reintegration of extremists highlight the role that family members can play in providing a supportive environment for individuals leaving extremist groups.⁸ Yet, to account for the negative influence that family members may have had in radicalization processes,⁹ services provided by deradicalization initiatives must include, or at least bridge to, an expansive definition of ‘family’ that recognizes that informal social attachments and controls such as extended family (and ‘chosen families’), peers, and interrelated community influences have a more direct effect on a person’s behavior than formal social controls.
- Facilitate resocialization and reduce stigma: Stigma, whether self-, social, or structural, influences social relationships, stress levels, behavioral and psychological responses, and resource availability and can thus be a major hindering factor to effective community reintegration. Indeed, providing services and assistance to individuals who have, essentially, broken the social contract by engaging in violent extremism, can hinder social capital by contributing to the polarization of the political landscape, undermining the public’s trust in government, and reducing support for human rights and democratic norms. Thus, deradicalization initiatives should also seek to understand the grievances of the broader community concerning right-wing extremist movements, how evidence-based stigma reduction practices can be incorporated into efforts to mitigate these grievances, how to address underlying social stigma and discrimination in a manner that enhances support for such programs and, where possible, create opportunities for integrated reconciliation activities between extremists, their family members, and the broader community.

⁶ Ventriglio, A., & Bhugra, D. (2019). Identity, alienation, and violent radicalization. *Evil, terrorism and psychiatry*, 17-29.

⁷ Smith, L. G., Blackwood, L., & Thomas, E. F. (2020). The need to refocus on the group as the site of radicalization. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(2), 327-352.

⁸ “Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders,” Global Counterterrorism Forum, <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2016%20and%20before/GCTF-Rome-Memorandum-ENG.pdf?ver=2016-09-01-121309-677>.

⁹ Mohammed M. Hafez, “The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 2, February 2016, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-ties-that-bind-how-terrorists-exploit-family-bonds/>.



5) Invest in evaluations: Evaluations can be time-consuming and difficult, especially when interventions are tailored on a case-by-case basis. To ensure that programs continue to meet the ever-changing needs of individuals and adapt to contextual realities, programs should:

- Frame their objectives to account for personal and social aspects of disengagement and deradicalization processes. This includes:
 - Understanding that deradicalization and rehabilitation are long-term processes, and what works and for whom will vary over time;
 - Realizing that no program will be 100% effective, and failures are to be examined.
- Reflect the time and place of implementation, to account for variables that may impact individual and collective processes.
- Promote transparency and accountability between service providers and clients, between all stakeholders involved in the process, and between authorities and the broader public.
- Be made available to practitioners and policymakers alike, to ensure that research can be translated into evidence-based practices.

If effectively developed, deradicalization initiatives can become multifaceted interventions that address (primary, secondary, and tertiary) prevention, threat assessment and management, recidivism (re-engagement) reduction, promote social cohesion, and recognize that counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approaches can coexist, overlap, and prove mutually reinforcing in the fight against right-wing extremism.

More information on the points raised in this submission can be found in the [Theory of Change](#) elaborated as part of the *Alternative Pathways* program and on the *4R Network* [website](#).