Cutting through complexity

*Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)*

Gielen, A.-J.E.

**Publication date**
2020

**Document Version**
Other version

**License**
Other

**Citation for published version (APA):**

**General rights**
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Programmes and interventions to counter violent extremism (CVE) have become widespread across Europe. CVE is a relatively new and very complex phenomenon. The term itself has become a – contested – catch phrase for a broad array of interventions targeting different populations at different stages in the radicalization process. The complexity of CVE has resulted in a serious lack of evaluations in the field. Those few evaluations that we can draw upon are very heterogeneous, both in terms of evaluation method and the type of interventions that they address. It is therefore impossible to make any grounded statements on the effectiveness of CVE. Academia thus has little theoretical basis for adequately advising the policy and practitioner community on the best course of action.

We are in need of an evaluation method that can accommodate the complexity of CVE, while providing an authoritative basis for new evaluations and at the same time exposing incorrect or too limited, normative assumptions in CVE policy. We also require a ‘meta-analysis’ method for synthesizing the variety of evaluations available to produce generic insights.

This study applies and further develops realistic evaluation and realist review to provide an evaluation and synthesis method for complex social programmes such as CVE. The end result is heuristic development of the realistic evaluation method which provides a basis for future CVE evaluation studies. The dissertation also provides insights on relevant contexts and mechanisms in CVE, which will help policymakers further develop their CVE programmes.

Amy-Jane Gielen is a political scientist who completed her dissertation at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam. She has more than a decade of experience in evaluating CVE.
Cutting through Complexity

Evaluating Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Academisch proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de
Universiteit van Amsterdam op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit

op vrijdag 31 januari 2020, te 11.00 uur

door Amy-Jane Emma Gielen
geboren te Amsterdam
Promotiecommissie:

Promotor(es):
Prof. dr. J. Grin (Universiteit van Amsterdam)
dr. F.F. Vermeulen (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

Overige leden:
Prof. dr. J.L. Uitermark (Universiteit van Amsterdam)
Prof. dr. J.N. Tillie (Universiteit van Amsterdam)
Prof. dr. M. de Goede (Universiteit van Amsterdam)
Prof. dr. B.A. de Graaf (Universiteit Utrecht)
Prof. dr. P.R. Neumann (King's College London)
Prof. dr. M. Noordegraaf (Universiteit Utrecht)

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
# Contents

## 1 Introduction
1.1 The complexity of violent extremism and challenges for evaluation
1.2 Policymaking and societal debate: The repercussions of neglecting complexity
1.3 CVE as an essentially contestable concept
1.4 Realistic evaluation and realist review
1.5 Research focus and approach
1.6 My role as a researcher

## 2 Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances and How?
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Evaluation methods and CVE
2.3 Realist review
2.4 Realist CVE synthesis
2.5 Discussion and conclusion

## 3 Lessons from a Realist Review of Countering Violent Extremism: Development of Refined Heuristic Guidelines for Complex Social Programmes
3.2 Heuristic guidelines for realist review of complex social programmes
3.3 Applying realist review to CVE
   3.3.1 Step 1: Clarify the scope of the review
   3.3.2 Step 2: Searching for primary CVE studies
   3.3.3 Step 3: Quality appraisal
   3.3.4 Step 4: Extracting the data
   3.3.5 Step 5: Synthesizing the CVE studies
   3.3.6 Step 6: Dissemination of findings
3.4 Adapted heuristic guidelines for realist review for complex social problems
3.5 Conclusion
4 Supporting Families of Foreign Fighters: A Realistic Approach for Measuring Effectiveness 81
  4.1 Introduction 81
  4.2 Family support practices across Europe 83
  4.3 Measuring the effectiveness of family support 86
  4.4 Folk theories on family support: Lessons learnt 89
  4.5 Developing a theory on family support for empirical testing 93
  4.6 Conclusion and discussion 97

5 Exit Programmes for Female Jihadists: A Proposal for Conducting a Realistic Evaluation of the Dutch Approach 99
  5.1 Introduction 99
  5.2 Definitions 101
  5.3 Theoretical model (step 1) 103
  5.4 Hypotheses on C-M-Os for exit programmes 108
  5.5 Multi-method data collection and analysis (steps 2 and 3) 112
  5.6 Conclusion: Refined programme theory (step 4) and reflection 116

6 Evidence-based Informed Policy Design for Support Groups for Families of Foreign Fighters: Ex Ante Application of Realistic Evaluation and Review 119
  Amy-Jane Gielen and Annebregt Dijkman 119
  6.1 Introduction 119
  6.2 Realist review to develop a theoretical model 121
    6.2.1 Step 1: Scope of the review 121
    6.2.2 Steps 2 and 3: Searching for primary CVE studies and quality appraisal 124
    6.2.3 Step 4: Extracting the data 124
    6.2.4 Steps 5 and 6: Synthesizing the support group literature and dissemination 126
  6.3 Ex ante realistic evaluation: Methodology 128
  6.4 Ex-ante realistic evaluation: Relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes for support groups for families of foreign fighters 132
    6.4.1 Contexts (C) of group-based support for families of foreign fighters 132
    Characteristics of the target audience 132
    Content of group-based support 134
    Composition of the group 135
    Group size 137