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Evaluating countering violent extremism (CVE)

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2 Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances and How?⁸

2.1 Introduction

Europe is confronted with increased violent extremism, and the security threat is expected to rise further in the years to come. Within the EU, member states are especially concerned about jihadist terrorism. Particularly worrying is the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, in which Europeans travel to and from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. But jihadist terrorism is not the only issue. Right-wing and left-wing extremist violence and that of lone attackers also pose a threat (Europol, 2016; 2017).

These developments have strengthened calls for effective counter measures. Throughout Europe, responses to the increasing threat have involved a range of measures. Most countries have enacted new and increasingly tough counterterrorism laws and conducted increased security surveillance. At the same time, ‘softer’ measures have been implemented. These seek to prevent and counter radicalization and jihadist recruitment by improving the resilience of at-risk individuals and communities. ‘Soft’ strategies include awareness-raising among frontline practitioners, discrediting the extremist narrative via ‘counter-narratives’, and exit programmes such as deradicalization and disengagement initiatives (European Commission, 2014). Such measures were introduced in chapter 1 as ‘counter-radicalization’ or ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE).

CVE programmes have developed rapidly across Europe. However, evaluation of these programmes and interventions has not kept pace. In fact, after more than a decade of counter-radicalization policy and CVE programmes, effect evaluations remain scarce (Lousberg *et al.*, 2009; Lub, 2013; Gielen &

8 This chapter is a slightly edited version of Gielen, Amy-Jane (2017a), “Countering Violent Extremism. A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances and How?” *Terrorism & Political Violence*, pp. 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2017.1313736 (published ahead of print).

Junne, 2008; Gielen & Grin, 2010; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Bovenkerk & Van Hemert, 2013; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2013; Dawson *et al.*, 2014). Quite simply, as scholars we cannot as yet answer the question of what works in countering violent extremism.

This chapter explores the added value of the realist review approach in the field of CVE, to which realist review had not previously been applied. It starts by briefly exploring different evaluation methods, finally proposing 'realist review' as the most promising for the CVE domain. Realist review, also known as realistic review or realist synthesis, seeks to answer the question 'what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances'. It does this by synthesizing existing evaluation studies (Pawson, 2006). One of the crucial differences between general review and realist review is that general review attributes a hierarchy to the quality of evaluations. Randomized controlled trials are considered best. Yet, this is highly problematic in the field of CVE, as there are few quantitative evaluations, and randomized controlled trials are even more rare. By moving away from the 'what works' question and focusing instead on 'what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances' the realist review method allows us to draw on different types of studies. These may be empirical evaluations relying on quantitative or qualitative forms of data collection, but also theoretical studies and process evaluations. What follows is a realist review of CVE studies, describing what we can learn from these studies.

2.2 Evaluation methods and CVE

When evaluating CVE, one can opt for different evaluation methods. This chapter does not provide an extensive overview of all evaluation methods. Rather, it briefly discusses different methods that have been proposed or applied in our field.

Effect evaluation

Effect evaluation looks at the actual outcome of a programme or intervention. Has the programme or intervention met its objectives? Like social science more broadly, this type of evaluation research is generally divided into two camps. The first, positivist camp advocates quantitative methods, with randomized controlled trials often referred to as the 'gold standard'. Thus, the target audience of an intervention is divided, often at random, into

an experimental group to which the intervention is applied and a control group to which no intervention or a placebo is applied. The aim is to establish the effectiveness and side effects of an intervention, assuming a relatively direct, linear relationship between the intervention and outcomes. However, this assumed linear relationship means that the social context tends to be neglected (Berg & Timmermans, 2010). This is a weakness, as CVE is implemented not in an isolated clinical environment but in a social context. Violent extremism itself is a social phenomenon, and CVE programmes are influenced by and dependent on the social context in which they are carried out. Within the field of CVE no randomized controlled trials have been undertaken, only two quasi-experimental studies by Aldrich (2012) and a quantitative longitudinal study by Feddes *et al.* (2015).

The second, interpretivist camp emphasizes the role of interpretation and context (Yanow, 2006). By drawing on interpretive methods of data collection, such as interviews and participant observation, interpretivists seek to provide a 'thick description' of a specific intervention. However, interpretivists have been criticized as providing insight only into the effectiveness of one specific intervention in one specific context. An example of an interpretive effect evaluation is the study by Lakhani (2012) in which 56 interviews were conducted to assess the impact of community engagement under the UK's 'Prevent' strategy.

The strengths and weaknesses of both types of techniques mirror one another to some extent. Interpretive evaluators argue that for interventions and programmes that appear to have multiple and interacting causal relationships, randomized controlled trials do not necessarily provide the answer (Uitermark *et al.*, 2012). Conversely, the outcomes of interpretive evaluations are not necessarily valid in other contexts.

Pragmatic evaluation

Williams and Kleinman (2014) proposed utilization-focused evaluation in which stakeholders have a significant role. Horgan and Braddock (2010) suggested multiple-attribute utility technology (MAUT) as the most suitable evaluation model for our field, as it includes a number of stakeholders in the process of *developing* a programme, rather than only in its *ex post* evaluation. This early stakeholder involvement is said to ensure that multiple constituencies are accommodated. While Horgan and Braddock (*ibid.*) propose the use of merely mathematical calculations, Williams and Kleinman (2014) favour

a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Yet, both their methods are considered 'pragmatic evaluation'. These are evaluation techniques oriented toward meeting the needs of programme decision-makers and stakeholders (Rossi, 2004).

The pragmatic approach, however, is often criticized as leaning too much toward the needs of policymakers. These evaluations are sometimes said to be little more than a technical analytical discourse revolving around the positive effects of a programme. Little or no room is left to look at possible negative consequences or at whether the programme objectives are actually relevant to the problem situation, or what contributive value the intervention has for society as a whole. Williams *et al.* (2016) recently conducted a pragmatic evaluation of a US CVE programme using grounded theory and mixed methods. While the results were promising, they argued that further research was needed to assess whether the programme would also work in other municipalities.

Theory-driven evaluation

Theory-driven evaluation looks at a 'theory of change' or 'policy theory'. This comprises the underlying policy or scientific assumptions of a programme, rooted in part in the reflections, experience and knowledge of practitioners and policymakers garnered on the job (Weiss, 1995; Hoogerwerf, 1990; Bressers & Hoogerwerf, 1995). Policy theories are distinguished from social scientific theories in that these latter are designed to explain and provide generally applicable statements about human behaviour. Policy theories do not intend to explain, but aim merely to support certain (proposed) courses of action, to legitimize policy (Hoogerwerf, 1990). The merit of this type of evaluation lies in its ability to consider what interventions and programmes might work in countering radicalization, without having to conduct an actual evaluation. While a theory-driven approach to evaluation of CVE interventions and programmes provides plausible hypotheses for what works and does not work, it does not provide the definite answer. Empirical testing remains important. This is highlighted in the theory-driven study by Lub (2013) in which a meta-evaluation of different CVE measures was conducted.

Process evaluation

A process evaluation looks at the implementation of an intervention and whether it succeeded as planned. This type of evaluation can be very useful

from a project management perspective, as it provides information on, for example, whether all of the workshops in a specific programme were organized and whether the target audience was reached. But it cannot make any claims about causal effectiveness. An example of a process evaluation within CVE is Hirschfeld *et al.* (2012), which looks at programmes aimed at preventing violent extremism in the youth justice sector of the UK.

Realistic evaluation

Realistic evaluation, also called ‘realistic evaluation’, aims to identify the combination of mechanisms and contexts leading to outcome patterns, also known as context-mechanism-outcome pattern configurations (C-M-Os). These indicate how programmes activate mechanisms, among whom and in what circumstances, to in turn produce behavioural change. In short, realistic evaluation is concerned with the question ‘what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances’ for social interventions and programmes (Pawson & Tilley, 1997: 85). Gielen (2015) applied this method to foreign fighter family support programmes and Veldhuis (2012) applied it to reintegration and rehabilitation programmes for terrorist offenders.

2.3 Realist review

While CVE evaluations remain limited, the above discussion highlights that there are several evaluation methods that can be and currently are applied in the CVE domain. However, the risk of comparing methods is that it inevitably raises the question of which evaluation methods are superior and which inferior. This leads to the attribution of hierarchy to CVE evaluation studies. A discussion of which studies are ‘better’ and ‘best’ will not help us to move forward, as the body of studies currently available is heterogeneous and limited. Furthermore, the above discussion underlines the importance of taking contextual conditions into account and including theory to establish the mechanisms that underlie the workings of an intervention or programme. To advance, we need to begin by finding out what we can learn from synthesizing the existing CVE evaluation studies. Realist review is particularly helpful for this task.

Realist review is a specific method within the realistic evaluation tradition. It is not used to evaluate particular interventions or programmes, but rather to synthesize *existing* evaluations. Realist review is essentially a form of

systematic review, but it follows the realist principles and thus also revolves around the question ‘what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances’. In contrast to traditional systematic reviews, it does not value one evaluation method over others or attribute a hierarchy to evaluation methods. Furthermore, realist review does not seek to define a mean effect size. Rather, its premise is that each evaluation study can be valuable in terms of analysing relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes (Pawson, 2006: 74). As a consequence, realist review is not standardized or reproducible. It is the task of the reviewer to develop an interpretive trail that traces how specific evaluation studies lead to certain judgements (Pawson *et al.*, 2005: 32).

The method’s starting point is that complex interventions are not simple ‘black boxes’, but generally consist of different components that do not act in a linear fashion and are highly dependent on the context in which they take place. The overarching goal of realist review is to create a middle-range theory of how and why programmes work, which in turn can be used to derive policy recommendations, either for implementation or for the shaping of new interventions (Pawson, 2006: 74). Most realist reviews have been conducted in the healthcare sector. In those reviews researchers can often draw on a large body of literature for hypothesizing what might work and how. However, realist review is also specifically meant for areas of intervention and programmes where evaluation is lacking, which is the case for CVE. So as a method, realist review would seem very suited for finding out what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances in countering violent extremism.

The methodological rules for realist review are still emerging. Though not set in stone, they tend to follow the six steps of the traditional ‘Cochrane reviews’ as conducted in the medical sector: (i) clarifying the scope of the review, (ii) searching for primary studies, (iii) appraising the quality of studies, (iv) extracting the data, (v) synthesizing the data and (vi) disseminating the findings (*ibid.*: 79–100).

Step 1: Scope of the CVE review

The first step is thus to clarify the scope of the review. Like counterterrorism and counter-radicalization, there are no clear definitions of CVE. Rather, it has become a catch phrase for a policy spectrum ranging from early prevention and safeguarding measures for society, groups and communities to very targeted programmes for violent extremists, such as deradicalization and

disengagement (Harris-Hogan *et al.*, 2016). Thus, CVE consists of a multitude of interventions and programmes, with varying underlying mechanisms and implemented in different contexts, leading to different outcome patterns. The first aim of the review is therefore to provide an overview of studies that convey insights into relevant context, mechanism and outcome patterns in relation to countering violent extremism.

Step 2: Searching for primary CVE studies

The next step of the review is to search for primary studies. For the current realist review, several databases were searched, such as the Social Sciences Citation Index, 'CataloguePlus' (which includes all of the main databases) and Google Scholar, to identify studies related to countering violent extremism and evaluation. Search words were 'countering violent extremism', 'CVE', 'violent extremism', 'preventing violent extremism', 'prevention of violent extremism', 'radicalization', 'deradicalization' and 'countering radicalization' in combination with 'evaluation' or words related to evaluation such as 'impact' and 'effectiveness'. The search period was from September 2001 until March 2017, as most CVE policy was developed after the 9/11 attacks and onwards. The search produced 109,886 citations. Inclusion criteria were studies that either empirically evaluated existing CVE programmes or specific CVE interventions or theorized on what might work for CVE based on empirical or theoretical studies. No exclusion criteria were formulated for geographical scope, as the realist review method suggests that we can learn as much from a deradicalization programme in Yemen as we can from a mentoring programme in the UK. However, studies that focused completely on legal or 'hard' measures, such as freezing finances, waterboarding and surveillance, were excluded from the review. Additionally excluded were studies that only looked at processes of radicalization or violent extremism, without providing insights on how these should be countered and studies that lacked any form of methodology.

This realist review produced 73 different studies (Table 2.1). Fourteen of these studies can be considered 'effect evaluations'. Although some authors did not consider their own study an effect evaluation, due to the lack of control groups (randomized or not) or an absence of pre- and post-measurements, these 14 studies are labelled effect evaluations here, as they attempted to assess impact or effectiveness among a target audience of specific CVE interventions or programmes. These evaluations used a range of methodologies. Four studies used a quantitative methodology (of which two

quasi-experimental); nine studies were qualitative in nature (conducted through, e.g., interviews, participant observation, focus groups and desk research); and one study applied a combination of methods (i.e., theory, surveys and focus groups).

The review also revealed 14 studies that could be considered 'process evaluations'. These focused on the implementation and output of a specific CVE intervention or programme, using methods such as interviews with stakeholders (e.g., policymakers and practitioners) and document analysis.

The remaining studies were theory-driven in the sense that they drew on the radicalization and deradicalization literature (often based on empirical studies with the target audience) or other bodies of literature, such as psychology, the literature on gangs and cults and experiences of practitioners, to assess what these might teach us for effective CVE measures and policies. These studies did not claim to offer policy evaluations in any strict sense (e.g., identifying positive or negative effects of interventions), but rather offered critical discussions of effectiveness in the light of new or established scientific theory or empirical data.

The evaluations identified addressed a wide range of interventions and programmes. A number of evaluations (23) focused on 'increasing resilience', individually (through mentoring), in groups (through training programmes for youth at risk) and at a community level (through forms of community engagement). Preventive programmes, such as counter-radicalization efforts and 'soft' counterterrorism programmes were most discussed (24 studies). These studies looked at efforts of specific countries, such as Denmark, the UK, Australia, Canada and the US, or by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Kenya, but also at CVE programmes in general and at the EU level.

'Exit programmes', commonly known as deradicalization and disengagement programmes, were the subject of 15 studies, in the sense that these studies looked at specific programmes or provided empirically-based or theory-driven models for how one could deradicalize or disengage. Forms of counter-communication, such as radio programming and countering online extremist content, were discussed in eight of the studies. Finally, two studies looked at how families and networks (peers/friends) could be effectively mobilized to counter violent extremism. One study was a combination, as it sought ways to increase resilience through peer networks.

Table 2.1: Overview of CVE evaluation studies as part of the realist review

Author(s)	Type of study	Type of intervention/programme
Aldrich (2012)	Effect evaluation (quantative)	Counter-communication: radio programming
Aldrich (2014)	Effect evaluation (quantative)	Counter-communication: radio programming
Feddes <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Effect evaluation (quantative)	Resilience via group training
Dunn <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Effect evaluation (quantative)	Resilience via community engagement
Johns <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via group training/mentoring
Vermeulen (2014)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via community engagement
Aly (2014)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via education
Kundnani (2009)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via community engagement
Liht & Savage (2013)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via group training
Lakhani (2012)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	Resilience via community engagement
Choudhury & Fenwick (2011)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE programme
James & Zeuthen (2014)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE programme
Finn <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE programme
Williams <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Effect evaluation (qualitative)	CVE programme
Youth Justice Board (2012)	Process evaluation	CVE programme
Jacoby (2016)	Process evaluation	CVE programme
Lamb (2013)	Process evaluation	Resilience via community engagement
O'Toole <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Process evaluation	Resilience via community engagement
Spalek & Davies (2012)	Process evaluation	Resilience via individual mentoring
Moffet & Sgro (2016)	Process evaluation	Family and network support/resilience via education
Bakker & Schuurman (2016)	Process evaluation	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
El Said (2012)	Process evaluation	Exit: deradicalization
Barkindo & Bryans (2016)	Process evaluation	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Bjorgo & Horgan eds. (2009)	Theory-driven/process evaluation	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Demant <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Theory-driven/process evaluation	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Horgan & Braddock (2010)	Theory-driven/process evaluation	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Stevens & Neumann (2009)	Theory-driven/process evaluation	Counter-communication: counter narratives
Mastroe (2016)	Theory-driven/process evaluation	CVE-programme
Greenberg (2016)	Theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
Davies <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
Ferguson (2016)	Theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
Beutel <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
Szmania & Fincher (2017)	Theory-driven	Counter-communication: counter narratives
Gielen (2015)	Theory-driven	Family and network support
Williams & Horgan (2016)	Theory-driven	Family and network support
Lub (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Lindekilde (2012a)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Lindekilde (2012b)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Bakker (2015)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Schmid (2013)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Harris-Hogan <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Bjorgo (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Thomas (2010)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
De Graaf & de Graaf (2010)	Theory-driven	CVE programme

Author(s)	Type of study	Type of intervention/programme
Korn (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Cohen (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Thomas (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Selim (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Young <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Kutner (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Ragazzi (2016)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Spalek & Weeks (2017)	Theory-driven	CVE programme
Mc Donald (2011)	Theory-driven	Resilience via youth work
Stevens (2009)	Theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
Bigo <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
Mirahmadi (2016)	Theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
Naaz (2016)	Theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement (women)
Weine <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Theory-driven	Resilience via mental healthcare
Quartermaine (2016)	Theory-driven	Resilience via education
Long (2016)	Theory-driven	Resilience via education
Ghosh <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Theory-driven	Resilience via education
Weine (2012)	Theory-driven	Resilience via individual, group and community engagement
Briggs (2010)	Theory-driven	Resilience via community engagement
Veldhuis (2012)	Theory-driven	Exit: rehabilitation and reintegration
Dechesne (2011)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Demant & De Graaf (2010)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Berger (2016)	Theory-driven	Exit: disengagement
Henry (2016)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Ferguson (2016)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Hamidi (2016)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Bastug (2016)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement
Mitchell (2017)	Theory-driven	Exit: deradicalization and disengagement

Steps 3 and 4: Judging and analysing CVE studies

Quality appraisal and extracting and synthesizing the data are, respectively, the third and fourth steps of realist review. In terms of quality appraisal, traditional review attributes a hierarchy to evaluations, in which randomized controlled trials are considered best. The data extracted in the review are preferably presented in a matrix with mean effect sizes and some form of judgement with respect to the quality of the evaluations (Pawson, 2006: 87–93). In our case, however, this would have no added value, as most of the CVE studies are not comparable. To illustrate, the two studies of Aldrich (2012 and 2014), with their quasi-experimental methodology and relatively positive outcomes, would be qualified as the ‘best evaluation’ and as such might also be considered ‘best practice’ in CVE. However, these studies assessed

the effectiveness of radio programming as part of a CVE strategy in Mali, Niger and Chad. These are countries where relatively large segments of the population listen to the radio and lack other communication media, such as the Internet. It would be inappropriate to recommend radio programming as a CVE best practice in general, as the context in more digitalized (Western) countries is completely different.

Realist review argues that any hierarchy in evaluations should be abandoned. Instead, primary studies should be valued in two ways: by an assessment of relevance ('Is the primary study relevant to the explanatory focus of the review?') and an assessment of rigour ('Does the study help clarify the particular explanatory challenge?') (Pawson, 2006: 87–99).

The fourth step, extracting the data, is not about the mean effect size, but about finding relevant context, mechanism and outcome pattern configurations (*ibid.*: 97–93). For this purpose, each identified article was analysed in terms of the following themes: (i) type of evaluation; (ii) type of intervention, aim of the programme or intervention, description of the programme or intervention including target group, theory of change and outcome; and (iii) any lessons learnt or recommendations produced.

Steps 5 and 6: Synthesizing the CVE studies and dissemination of findings

Realist synthesis, the fifth step of the review, is about refinement of the programme theory in order to determine what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances. Keeping in mind these steps of judging, extracting and synthesizing the data, the review does not separately discuss each study in which 'A does not work, B does work and C works partially'. Rather, relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes are discussed and realist recommendations are made such as 'remember mechanism X', 'beware of Y' and 'take care of Z' (*ibid.*: 93–99). These realist recommendations are then disseminated in the policy arena, with this dissemination forming the sixth and final step of realist review (*ibid.*: 99–102).

2.4 Realist CVE synthesis

Now that the methodology of realist review has been elaborated, what can we learn from our realist review of CVE studies? This section does not summarize all 73 articles separately, but rather discusses the most important

findings regarding contexts, mechanisms, outcomes and lessons learnt at the programme and intervention level.

CVE programmes and policy

Several studies in the review were specifically dedicated to what we could learn from other programmes, countries and literatures to shape our CVE policy. It is from some of these studies, alongside evaluations of specific interventions, that we derive a first important lesson for development of a CVE programme: the effectiveness of a CVE programme is very much dependent on how the programme is interpreted. If specific groups and communities feel negatively and disproportionately targeted by the CVE strategy, its effectiveness will be undermined (De Graaf & De Graaff, 2010; Lindekilde, 2012; Spalek & Davies, 2012; Khalid & Zeuthen, 2014). The studies also teach us that any form of CVE policy should address the grievances (both real and perceived) and factors that led to radicalization and violent extremism.

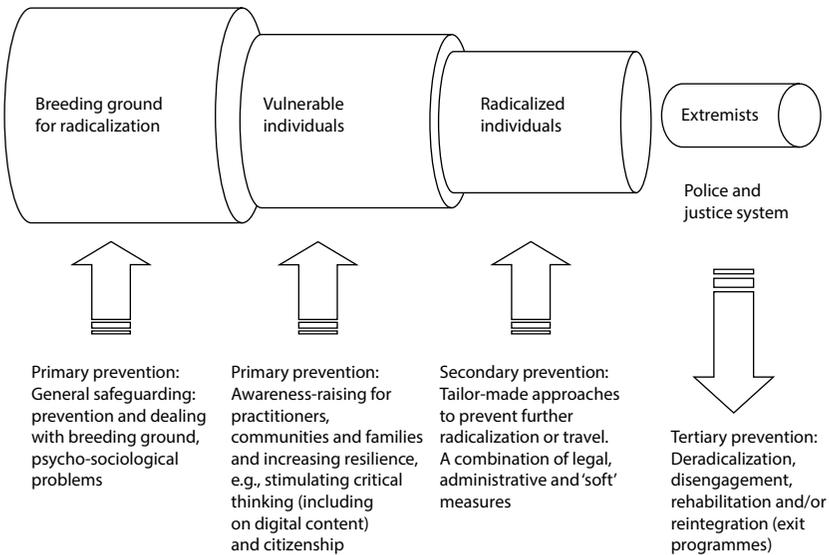
Bakker (2015), for example, presented the Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law (TTSRL) radicalization model. This model is a theory of change consisting of root causes (political, economic and cultural), identification processes, network dynamics, relative deprivation, trigger events and personal factors (psychological characteristics and personal experiences). For any CVE programme to be comprehensive, all of these aspects must be addressed. Similar but less extensive models were presented by Hirschfeld *et al.* (2012) and Bigo *et al.* (2014).

The only CVE programme that has been evaluated using mixed evaluation methods is that of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), a community-based Muslim-led organization in the United States. Their CVE programme consists of three pillars: educating communities, training law enforcement and social service providers on Islam, and a focus on volunteerism and multicultural programming (Williams *et al.*, 2016). An evaluation of the programme (*ibid.*) claimed that it was the first evidence-based CVE-relevant programme in the United States and that it had the potential to be effective in other US municipalities.

Studying Australian CVE policy, Harris-Hogan *et al.* (2016) differentiated three forms of preventive CVE strategies based on a public health model. Primary CVE initiatives were identified as those focusing on the

prevention of radicalization. These are designed to educate individuals about violent extremism and to prevent establishment of breeding grounds for the radicalization of individuals, but they can also include awareness-raising programmes for practitioners. Programmes in the secondary group consist of interventions for those who are showing signs of radicalization, such as engagement with an extremist social network. Tertiary-level CVE programmes are those aimed at known extremists. These seek to facilitate those already considered extremist to disengage from a violent extremist network and desist from violent behaviour. Similar forms of prevention are also recognized in the studies of Williams *et al.* (2016), Korn (2016), Cohen (2016), Selim (2016) and Young *et al.* (2016). The CVE prevention model has been visualized by Gielen (2008, 2015b) and in figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: Overview of CVE policy spectrum in the form of a prevention classification model



Lub (2013) drew lessons about the possible effectiveness of primary and secondary CVE interventions used in the Netherlands and Europe. He distinguished four typical CVE interventions: (i) multidisciplinary interventions aimed at preventing or reducing radical behaviour of individuals, (ii) peer mediation, (iii) self-esteem enhancement and (iv) intergroup contact interventions. He has researched the evidence base of these interventions in other fields as well, such as criminal behaviour, education, and drug and alcohol abuse. He concluded that the scientific basis for peer mediation

and self-esteem enhancement is weak, and the scientific basis for multidisciplinary interventions is small. Intergroup contact, on average, reduces prejudices about other groups, but effect sizes are generally small, and there is no evidence of any long-term impact.

Resilience

As noted, most studies discuss the notion of ‘increasing resilience’ and illustrate several ways in which this can be done. The study by Weine (2012) was developed along the lines of the above-mentioned public health inspired CVE prevention model. It recognizes different target audiences for interventions aimed at increasing resilience, particularly, vulnerable individuals, vulnerable subgroups and (diaspora) communities. Most interesting in this study is a summary of what we already know, scientifically speaking, about resilience and CVE. This highlights that (i) one can be resilient to some risks but not to others, (ii) resilience is formed at both the individual and the social level, (iii) families are the strongest buffer for risk factors for violent extremism and (iv) resilience in diaspora communities is shaped by a combination of home-country experiences, characteristics of a refugee camp with which one may have experience and the mainstream values of the country of residence. The most recent study, by Weine *et al.* (2017), stresses the importance of mental health professionals in community-based CVE initiatives. These authors argue that a multidisciplinary team should assess individuals at risk and arrange support and treatment. At the community level, they should provide outreach and education.

With respect to increasing resilience at the individual level, Spalek and Davies (2012) presented a process evaluation of a mentoring programme implemented in the UK for individuals considered vulnerable to different forms of violent extremism. Their study shows that a mentoring programme in CVE involves concepts such as relationship, trust and confidentiality. These are considered necessary preconditions to confront people with their (violent) extremist views. This study also highlights that political and cultural contexts should be taken into account in mentoring programmes, as they can influence programme outcomes.

To assess the effect of programmes aiming to increase the resilience of vulnerable groups, Feddes *et al.* (2015) conducted a quantitative effect evaluation of a Dutch resilience training called *Diamant* (Dutch for ‘diamond’). The programme sought to prevent radicalization. Among the valuable results

of this evaluation was the finding that increasing empathy and self-esteem played an important role in reducing support for violent extremism. As such, the resilience training was considered a promising tool for countering violent radicalization. However, an important disclaimer was made by the authors; that is, it had not yet been investigated whether the Diamant training was effective beyond high-school dropouts, for example, in deradicalizing actual violent extremists (*ibid.*: 9).

Schools are considered an important arena for increasing the resilience of young people (Ghosh, 2016; Thomas, 2016; Long, 2016). However, scholars do not agree on the best method for achieving this goal. For example, the UK CVE educational strategy revolves around the promotion of British values, but has been criticized. McDonald (2011) and Liht and Savage (2013) focused on increasing resilience, providing suggestions for how extremist messages could be countered and alternatives promoted. According to McDonald (*ibid.*), we should not fall into the extremist trap by trying to counter their dichotomies, such as ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and the West ‘at war’ with Islam. Rather, we must promote an alternative narrative making use of concepts such as loyalty, belonging and duty. In a qualitative effect evaluation, Liht and Savage (2013) found that such an approach can be effective. They developed a course to expose young Muslims to the different values of influential Muslims, including extremist discourse. Their theory of change was based on the concept of value complexity, and competing and even extremist values were openly discussed in terms of outcomes. The findings provide initial evidence that promoting value complexity might be more effective than the promotion of liberal Muslim or secular values (*ibid.*).

Aly *et al.* (2014) conducted a qualitative effect evaluation of an Australian education intervention: the Beyond Bali Education Package. They applied the theory of ‘moral disengagement’ to develop the intervention. Moral disengagement is the way that “individuals justify violence, dehumanize victims, disregard the harmful consequences of violence and absolve themselves of blame” (Aly *et al.*, 2014: 369). The programme was specifically designed “to build social cognitive resilience to violent extremism by engaging self-sanctions and preparing students to challenge the influence of violent extremism that can lead to moral disengagement” (*ibid.*: 369). The study found that “the programme had achieved some success in building resilience by engaging participants in constructing violent extremism as unjust and inhumane; fostering empathy with victims of violent extremism; developing self-efficacy in resisting violent extremist influences and

responding to influences in positive, productive ways while considering the devastating impacts of violent extremism” (*ibid.*: 383).

Most of the studies identified in the review were on community engagement and resilience. Those on negative outcomes and side effects claimed that community engagement programmes had led to the singling out of Muslim communities, stigmatization, polarization and ‘suspect communities’ (Briggs, 2010; Bigo *et al.*, 2014; Kundnani, 2009; Choudhury & Fenwick, 2011, Vermeulen, 2014; O’Toole *et al.*, 2012). Reviewing these studies, one may be inclined to think that community engagement is an ineffective approach to CVE which should be abandoned. Briggs (2010) is one of the few to explain the mechanisms behind community engagement and why it is such an important part of a CVE strategy. First, communities are able to serve as an early-warning system toward intelligence and police services. Second, when properly equipped, communities are able to safeguard young people from violent extremism, as they have a direct entry point with their young community members. Third, via community engagement interventions can be provided that address the grievances that young people harbour, both real and perceived. Finally, engagement can help prevent and overcome some of the negative side effects of specific community members being or feeling targeted by intelligence and police services.

How community engagement is done in practice was discussed by Lamb (2013) using a theory of change for community engagement. Based on the ‘three cups of tea’ concept, Lamb (*ibid.*) highlighted the importance of building a trust-based relationship before discussing the issue of CVE. With case studies in three cities and countries, Vermeulen (2014) illustrated subtle differences in community engagement. Community engagement in a neighbourhood of Amsterdam was very focused on engaging certain individuals, rather than organizations. In London and Berlin, community engagement focused on organizations, but the types of organization varied. In London, intensive relationships were sought with orthodox organizations, whereas in Berlin programme initiators opted for a more pragmatic approach (*ibid.*). An Australian community engagement initiative with Sydney Muslims and the police was evaluated positively. In surveys, community members indicated that they considered the initiative successful as it had led to direct contact, it was public and it involved in-depth relationships and partnerships. However, the ‘suspect community’ critique was heard here as well (Dunn *et al.*, 2016).

While most CVE community engagement programmes are criticized because Muslim communities tend to be targeted and singled out, the earlier-mentioned community-based Muslim-led organization WORDE has been applauded. According to Mirahmadi (2016), the success of its programme lay in its bottom-up top-down approach and the diversity of the organization. Diverse faith and ethnic groups had ownership and shaped the programme, but at the same time were supported by local government and law enforcement.

Exit programmes

Horgan and Braddock (2010) and Veldhuis (2012) underlined that 'exit programme' has become a catch phrase for efforts toward changing radical beliefs (deradicalization), the cessation of violence (disengagement) and reintegration and rehabilitation of violent extremists. El Said (2012) conducted a process evaluation of several exit programmes around the world. The findings provide insights on different contexts and outcome patterns of exit: preventing further radicalization, rehabilitating and counselling those who have already been radicalized (both state and individual initiatives) and collective deradicalization either in or out of prison. In terms of lessons learnt, the study stresses the political context and leadership, the role of families and civil society, and the role and quality of the religious experts involved. The political and developmental strength of the state was also found to be important. However, no single formula was found to deal with all cases of violent extremism, even within a single region. Rather, counter-radicalization and deradicalization efforts must be tailor-made and take into account cultural mores, traditions, history and rules and regulations within each country.

The importance of context was also highlighted by Demant and De Graaf (2010), but in a different manner. They emphasized that any government-run deradicalization policy must be understood by the discourse produced or reinforced through its interventions. This discourse, they argued, can have a profound effect on processes of deradicalization. Drawing on Turkish case studies, Bastug and Evlek (2016) illustrated how a change in government policy from soft measures to hard measures affected disengagement and deradicalization programmes.

Schuurman and Bakker (2016) provided a small sample process evaluation in which they evaluated an exit programme for one specific target audience:

formerly imprisoned violent extremists. This study is helpful, in particular, in illustrating crucial contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of an exit programme, such as managerial support for probation staff and good cooperation with stakeholders such as municipalities. It also highlights that stakeholders can hold different views of the envisaged outcome, which can affect interventions, for example, by producing a (too) strong focus on behavioural aspects (disengagement) instead of cognitive interventions (deradicalization).

Similar process evaluation studies were conducted by Demant *et al.* (2008), Bjorgo and Horgan (2009) and Dechesne (2011), but these were combined with a theory-driven approach. Bjorgo and Horgan (2009) distinguished 'push and pull factors' for leaving violent extremist organizations. Push factors were identified as the reasons for wanting to leave the violent extremist organization: generally dissatisfaction with the extremist group (e.g., negative experiences and loss of faith in ideology or politics). Pull factors were defined as positive alternatives, such as family obligations and a longing for a normal life. Demant *et al.* (2008) categorized factors leading to deradicalization or disengagement based on *content* instead of *direction* (push or pull). They distinguished three types: normative, affective and continuance factors. Normative (ideological) factors consist of discontent or a decreased appeal of the ideology. Affective (social) factors include discontent with the extremist group or subculture. Finally, continuance (practical) factors refer to effects on life circumstances, such as feelings of stigmatization and external pressure and isolation. Both Demant *et al.* (2010) and Bjorgo and Horgan (2009) identified potential barriers to disengagement, such as social and psychological dependence on the group and fear of legal sanctions. Alternatively, individual decisions to exit can be facilitated by trigger events and by significant others who discourage violence. Similar conclusions were reached in the study by Ferguson (2016), on disengagement in Northern Ireland.

In short, these studies are based on empirical data from voluntary exits and provide insights on what opportunities and barriers should be taken into consideration when shaping exit programmes. Demant *et al.* (2010) also stressed the importance of a comprehensive approach to deradicalization and disengagement. In their opinion, right-wing exit programmes are too focused on dealing with practical circumstances, whereas the ideological (normative) component is neglected. Exit programmes for extremist Muslims are said to focus too much on normative factors, fixating on theology

and overlooking affective factors. Demant *et al.* (*ibid.*: 181) claimed that European exit programmes would benefit from a broader focus in which normative, affective and continuance factors are dealt with in a more even and combined fashion.

Family and network support

The earlier-mentioned study by Weine (2012) stressed the importance of family for increasing resilience. Furthermore, El Said (2012) highlighted the importance of family in deradicalization, like the above-mentioned studies on exit, as significant others such as families can encourage and facilitate exit. This is only one of the few rationales behind family support programmes as part of a CVE strategy, as discussed in Gielen (2015a). At a primary prevention stage, family support can be offered to parents of individuals at risk to help them create and maintain a positive family environment. Families with a child who has travelled to a conflict zone can be offered support in establishing and maintaining contact. They can also be provided tools and information to safeguard siblings and other close family members of the foreign fighter, because they too are at risk of being groomed for violent extremism. Finally, families of violent extremists who were killed during combat or a suicide mission need support. It is often forgotten that these families are not perpetrators, but victims of the choices their family member made. The loss, shame and rejection by community and society often cause grief, anxiety, despair and trauma and may thus trigger grievances and other radicalization factors. Family support in the form of grief counselling can help prevent siblings from following the same path as the violent extremist family member. Yet, family members of deceased violent extremists have not previously been mentioned in the CVE literature.

Williams and Horgan (2016) proposed that the focus of CVE should be not only on the families, but also on peers. Based on their research they argued that peers seem best placed to notice early-warning signals of violent extremism. However, the study also reveals the reluctance of peers to reach out to CVE practitioners and networks, or even to family members, because they fear potential repercussions. This study proposes an evidence-based crisis hotline that peers can phone or text anonymously. Williams *et al.* (2016) evaluated a Muslim-led CVE programme that included 'peer gatekeeper training'. High school students were taught to recognize and assist peers who felt isolated, were experiencing a personal crisis or were suffering from (cyber)bullying. Among the recommendations was a proposal to include

peer gatekeeper training as part of an evidence-based CVE policy (*ibid.*: 88). The merit of the peer method was also acknowledged by Moffett and Sgro (2016), who described a peer-to-peer initiative in their study. The central idea behind the initiative was for students around the world to counter extremism among their peers and in their communities. Young people were stimulated to develop and implement a social or digital intervention (e.g., an initiative, product or tool) targeted to empower their peers and counter hate.

Counter-communication

Stevens and Neumann (2009) and Aldrich (2012, 2014) highlighted the different forms that counter-communication can take, such as online counter-communication and radio programming. While radio programmes are considered relatively effective in changing attitudes toward violence, for example, in Africa, as observed, radio programming is unlikely to be the best way forward in Europe. What might work in Mali will not necessarily work in highly-digitalized France.

According to Stevens and Neumann (2009), we should concentrate not only on reducing the availability of online extremist content by, for example, take-down measures, but also provide alternatives to extremist content. This approach is known as ‘counter-narratives’ or ‘alternative narratives’. While the rationale behind it seems logical, the counter-narrative approach has recently been the target of increased scrutiny. Ferguson (2016) argued that there is little hard evidence of a causal relationship between exposure to violent extremist content and participation in violent extremist activities. The assumption that the extremist narrative can be countered by providing an alternative or counter-narrative also remains unproven. Davies *et al.* (2016) examined the content of six online CVE programmes and concluded that they lacked a theoretical foundation and did not address the mechanisms that underlie the radicalization process, such as contextual factors and identity issues.

2.5 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has explored the added value of the realist review approach in the field of CVE. Realist review was developed specifically for evaluation of complex social programmes. But until now it had not yet been applied in the CVE domain. While traditional reviews often present a matrix of

mean effect sizes and some form of judgement with respect to the quality of the evaluations examined, the realist review method enables synthesis of existing CVE evaluations without attributing a hierarchy to the evaluation methods used in the studies. Such a hierarchy has no added value anyway in the CVE field, as CVE studies are not generally comparable. Rather, the realistic method seeks to highlight relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes in order to answer the explorative question ‘what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances’.

The realist review presented in this chapter underlined that CVE is an umbrella phrase encompassing many different interventions and programmes. The studies examined help us to gain a better understanding of what CVE precisely entails. The review also revealed that while the CVE literature is developing rapidly, effect evaluations remain limited. Of the 73 CVE studies identified, only 14 could be considered effect evaluations. Most CVE studies are theory-driven, providing policy recommendations based mainly on theoretical frameworks or conceptual models, rather than empirical evidence. However, the realist review method used in this chapter illustrated that different forms of evaluation can increase our understanding of what types of CVE measures are being used, how they work, for whom they work and what lessons we can draw from them.

This chapter thus contributed to the CVE domain by synthesizing the currently available literature. This places policymakers and practitioners in a better position to draw on the scientific lessons derived so far. Scholars, too, can benefit from the review, as the lessons learnt can advance theory building for future evaluations. Furthermore, we are now in a better position to zoom in on specific aspects of CVE using the realist review framework as developed in this chapter. The realist review framework can be applied to very specific interventions or programmes. For example, increasing resilience is an important aspect of countering violent extremism and draws on different programme theories, such as the theory of moral disengagement, bonding and bridging and value complexity. Future reviews, could focus on one or more of these theories to develop a more refined programme theory configuration on increasing resilience as part of a CVE strategy.

The review raises some points worthy of further discussion. First, the review found that CVE studies and evaluations have taken flight in the past years. Half of the reviewed studies were published in 2016 or 2017. While this growth in the field is encouraging, it also provokes questions on how we as

a research community can keep the realist CVE review up to date. Second, the final step of realist review is informing policymakers and providing them scientific information on 'what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances'. This requires active engagement between policymakers and scientists and requires us to think about different forms of dissemination. Is dissemination best done via peer-reviewed journals? Or should we also seek more targeted and interactive formats? Finally, such engagement should contribute to the earlier and active involvement of researchers in the CVE policy domain, because we still have a long journey ahead before evaluations of CVE interventions and programmes become the rule rather than the exception.