



ACTRI PERSPECTIVE

Preparing for a Life After Prison:
How Effective Intervention
Services Can Combat the
Drivers of Violent Extremism

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ACTRI is a cross-disciplinary 501c(3) nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right, extreme-left, and militant-jihadi political violence. We study the relationships between them and their effect on how ideologies emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.

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Introduction

Prisons are places of vulnerability and have historically served as recruitment hubs for those intending to spread their extremist ideologies amongst the vulnerable; they provide the ideal environments to develop and spread radical ideology.¹ Prison radicalization poses a persistent threat yet has not been systematically addressed within the United States prisons.² Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, there have been several instances where individuals have been radicalized behind bars.³ Compared to other countries, the U.S. remains behind in deploying effective deradicalization and disengagement programs for inmates who foster radical extremist views. With the current rise in violent extremism and the impending release of those incarcerated for terrorism-related crimes, it is prudent that the U.S. develops effective measures to combatting extremism behind bars.⁴

Violent Extremism in U.S. Prisons

The United States carries the highest incarceration rate in the world, housing 655 inmates per 100,000 of the population.⁵ There have been more than 500 arrests and prosecutions of individuals on jihadist terrorism-related offenses in the post 9-11 environment in the United States.⁶ While the number of incarcerated terrorists appears low, there is an overarching need to examine terrorism-related threat that they may pose to other inmates. However, weaker laws are associated with this threat, leading to fewer homegrown domestic terrorists identified within the U.S. prison system.⁷ There are just over 100 identified domestic terrorists incarcerated throughout the U.S. As domestic terrorism becomes a more urgent threat, an underlying issue stems from the disconnect between the recognized and the exact number of domestic right and left wing terrorists and violent extremists within the U.S. prison system.⁸ Since the main terror threat in the U.S. today stems from a political spectrum driven by far-right or far-left, the unidentified number of homegrown violent extremists and terrorists remains a complicating factor.⁹



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The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) promotes a more clear distinction between violent extremists and terrorists, which can be seen in their divergent definitions. Both international and domestic terrorism consists of violent, criminal acts committed by individuals or groups. Domestic terrorism is influenced by goals intended to further political, social, religious, racial, or environmental aims, while international terrorism stems from inspiration or association with a foreign terrorist organization.¹⁰ Where terrorism is an act, the FBI distinguishes violent extremism as an ideology that “encourages, condones, justifies, or supports violence” to achieve the above-stated objectives.¹¹

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) tends to designate domestic terrorists and violent extremists differently than the FBI, using a more conjoined definition of the two; combining terrorists, violent extremists, and sovereign citizens under a single umbrella term: extremist.¹² Grouping together terms with significant differences can lead to undermining the threat of some extremist offenders as well as lead to limitations in prosecution. Comparatively speaking, extremist offenders will not appear as “dangerous” as terrorists since they merely harbor violence condoning ideology but have not executed an act of terror. This notion has left many terrorist inmates identified and treated accordingly but often leaves the extremist offenders dispersed amongst prison populations.¹³ Since the BOP groups terrorists, violent extremists, and sovereign citizens under the same category, there is narrower criteria to be labeled as an extremist. Allowing inmates who potentially harbor violent extremist ideologies to go overlooked can inadvertently contribute to the radicalization process.¹⁴ Without the proper supervision, an inmate may have the chance to further radicalize or engage in the radicalization of others. There is significance in identifying violent extremist inmates upon entry to the U.S. prison system, as violent extremists require a different level of supervision than other inmates. Prison officials must ensure that violent extremist inmates do not self-radicalize or radicalize others. Supervision with close monitoring from trained personnel is prudent in preventing the radicalization of inmates.¹⁵

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The difference in understanding has caused inmates listed under the FBI's terrorist watchlist for at least five years to go unrecognized by the BOP and therefore were likely not adequately monitored.¹⁶ Additionally, weaker laws are associated with the threat of domestic terrorism, leading to fewer homegrown domestic terrorists identified within the U.S. prison system, leading to difficulties enforcing laws around domestic terrorism.¹⁷ Intervention services such as psychological evaluations, deradicalization services, therapy, rehabilitation, and the need to isolate from the general population are all elements that should be considered to foster an effective reintegration process upon release. Since it may not be documented that an inmate is associated with a terrorism-related crime, there is a significant chance that they will not receive the proper treatment or care needed to address the root causes of their extremism.¹⁸

By the end of 2025, it is estimated that nearly 75 Americans convicted of terrorism-related crimes will be released.¹⁹ Given that most terrorism-related sentences allow the convicted to return to society in a few years to a decade later, there are concerns pertaining to the rehabilitation, reintegration, and recidivism of these individuals. The pending release of terrorists from the U.S. prison system reveals the necessity for the further development of intervention services to mitigate the chances of recidivism upon release.

A primary hindrance that serves as a force multiplier for radicalization in prison lies within the lack of knowledge and education among key stakeholders. Radicalization is a gradual and cognitive process that looks different for everyone, which creates limitations for P/CVE practitioners when attempting to identify those that are being indoctrinated.²⁰ The prison environment amplifies the radicalization process because inmates tend to gravitate towards others who can project their extremist beliefs into the general population.

Social psychology demonstrates that several collective factors can strengthen the chances of radicalization and the development of violent extremist ideology.²¹ Terrorist recruiters typically seek the most deprived, disaffected, and vulnerable individuals; given that there is a ubiquitous presence of dissatisfied and disaffected individuals in prisons, indoctrination is a much easier and faster process.



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The recruiters offer group connectedness or the feeling of belongingness to vulnerable individuals, allowing them to defy their identity through the group.²² A sense of anonymity can make it easier for one to lower their inhibitions towards supporting the harming or killing of others, serving as a gateway to achieving ideology-inspired violent goals.²³ Prisons remain a reinforcing and triggering influence on the radicalization process as they are isolated, host a captive audience filled with disillusioned individuals.²⁴

The lack of data on the exact number of violent extremists in the prison system affects prisoner monitoring process as well. The lack of surveillance may lead to potentially high-risk violent extremists or terrorists placed with vulnerable, non-extremist inmates. The U.S. prison system is also overcrowded and understaffed, making it easier for recruiters to radicalize other inmates while avoiding detection.²⁵ Grouping radical inmates with non-terrorist inmates, especially newer inmates undergoing emotional and physical trauma, makes them more vulnerable to manipulation. These elements help to create the ideal ideological space for mass radicalization, fostering a hotbed for extremism.²⁶

An Invisible Process

Radicalization is a gradual process that occurs over months to years and is a nearly invisible process.²⁷ There are signs of radicalization, such as anger at people or the government, experiencing stress or depression, isolation, a need for belonging, etc. However, there are no set determinants of radicalization, making it more difficult to detect.²⁸ A 3-year study was conducted in 2009 to examine radicalization across 10 correctional facilities to measure the social climate that prisoners live in to determine if prisons act as fertile grounds for radicalization. The study consisted of interviews of over 210 prison officials and 270 prison inmates to obtain a first-hand account of the extent of radicalization in the U.S. correctional system. The study revealed that while prison radicalization is a concern, it does not appear to be a persistent issue in the prisons examined.²⁹ Many of the staff denied the presence of radicalization in their facilities, and inmates stated that they would be unwelcoming to terrorist offenders. It was concluded that prisons can avoid radicalization by recognizing the threat, sufficiently staffing, and avoiding overpopulation.³⁰ The doubting of the staff likely stems from the inability to identify the signs of radicalization. The mistake of assuming radicalization is nonexistent because of the lack of indicators has been observed with other prison-formed terrorists.

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Since generally speaking radicalization is a cognitive, ideological process, it is easy for an inmate's direct participation in a terrorist scheme to go ignored.³¹ The invisible radicalization process demonstrates the prudence of identifying the push and pull factors that drive an inmate to undergo radicalization.

Countering Violent Extremism in U.S. Prisons

Prisons are total institutions where similar-minded individuals are housed together and cut off from the rest of the world for a significant duration.³² The ultimate goal of total institutions is resocialization, which is the radical modification of inhabitants' personalities by purposefully controlling their environment.³³ United States prisons attempt to reach resocialization through rehabilitation, incapacitation, retribution, and deterrence.³⁴ However, it becomes increasingly more difficult to effectively re-socialize inmates with the growing number of inmates and declining number of staff in U.S. prisons today. Mass incarceration, a result of a decades-long policy failure in the United States, began to grow exponentially in the 1980s and is affecting U.S. prisons to this day.³⁵ Today, the U.S. incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world.³⁶ An unintended consequence of mass incarceration is the worsening conditions and overcrowding in U.S. prisons.³⁷

Prisons have the power to expedite violent extremism or play an essential role in preventing it. When at-risk offenders are incarcerated in prisons with controlled, contained, and appropriately managed environments, there is an opportunity for countering violent extremism interventions; training prison staff in risk identification and assessment is essential to preventing violent extremism in U.S. prisons.³⁸ It is necessary to identify potential at-risk offenders and analyze their risk, as well as the potential damage that can be done if radicalization occurs.³⁹ On the contrary, when prisons are overcrowded, lack worthy management practices, fail to acknowledge prisoners' rights, and have poor living conditions, there is a greater potential to expedite violent extremism, as poorly run prisons are conducive to violent extremism.⁴⁰



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Issues Faced by U.S. Prisons

Unidentified Number of Domestic Violent Extremists

The understudied area of terrorism recidivism is not the only significant issue that U.S. prisons are plagued with; the unidentified number of homegrown violent extremists, particularly right and left wing, within U.S. prisons is another concern.⁴¹ Post 9/11 environment has exacerbated fear and hostility—in some cases towards Islam and the Muslim community in general. Due to much of the public's perception of what constitutes extremism, the threat of domestic far-left and far-right extremism has largely gone underestimated or ignored out of fear of 'foreign' violent extremism.⁴² A complicating factor is that the U.S. does not currently designate domestic terrorist groups.⁴³ Because of the lack of such designation right and left wing extremists likely will not enter prison on terrorism-related charges. Prisons must, therefore, rely on their staff to identify inmates that demonstrate indicators of violent extremism, determine if they are affiliated with violent extremist organizations and, if so, ensure they receive the appropriate rehabilitative care.

Overgeneralization of Extremist Sentencing

Along with a lack of knowledge on the extent of violent extremists in U.S. prisons, there is a notion that once terrorists and violent extremists become incarcerated, they are imprisoned for life; therefore, the threat of terrorism is diminished with each imprisonment. In other words, the long term imprisonment of Abdel-Rahman (the blind Sheikh), Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (the Boston bomber), and Richard Reid (the shoe bomber) in supermax prisons does not mean the threat of terrorism is lessened.⁴⁴ Most arrested for terrorism-related crimes will be released within ten years, and without proper deradicalization measures, the threat of these offenders could essentially increase once they are released.⁴⁵ Deradicalization and disengagement programs are a relatively new aspect of some U.S. prisons. However, there needs to be a greater emphasis on them.⁴⁶ Treatment for violent extremists and terrorists should be distinct from those of the general prison population, as they pose a separate threat.⁴⁷

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The war comes home: The evolution of domestic terrorism in the United States

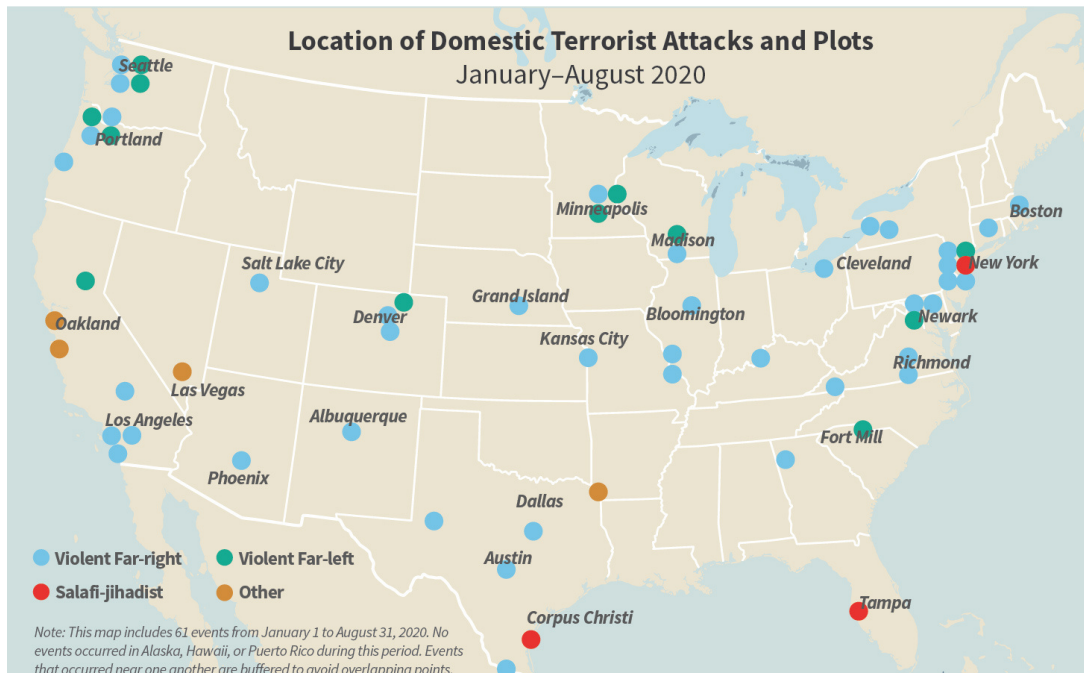


Figure 1: Source: Jones, Seth et al. (2020). Center for Strategic & International Studies Brief.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The overgeneralization of sentencing deemphasizes the need for rehabilitation and deradicalization programs in prisons. As illustrated in Figure 1, attacks motivated by domestic violent extremist groups have recently occurred within the United States.⁴⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a complicating factor as many prisons were faced with pressure to release prisoners to slow the spreading of the virus. For example, Nicholas Rovinski of Rhode Island was arrested in 2017 for supporting Islamic State.⁴⁹ He requested and was granted compassionate release over COVID-19 fears. Rovinski was originally intended to be released in 2028 but got off with time served and 10-year home confinement with electronic monitoring.⁵⁰ COVID-19 was just one of the many unexpected events that could have occurred. If anything, it has demonstrated a need to prepare for those unforeseeable events that can happen at any given moment.⁵¹

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The release of Rovinski and the pending release of others who have faced terrorism-related sentences demonstrate an overarching need for intensive intervention services to be widely available in U.S. prisons to ensure extremist inmates receive adequate time to rehabilitate and reintegrate back into society. In cases where an unexpected circumstance calls for the premature removal of a violent extremist, the community, as well as the prison system, would likely become more at ease with the release of an individual who has made significant progress in a deradicalization program than one who has not.

Push, Pull, and Personal Drivers of Extremism

Radicalization as a Unique Process

With violent extremism on the rise, prisons have become especially significant in countering violent extremism and radicalization. The notion of prisons as ‘hotbeds’ of radicalization has led to an increase in research on which factors make inmates vulnerable to radicalization.⁵² The radicalization process is independent and unique to the individual. It is the gradual, social process by which one begins to shift ideas, beliefs, and behaviors. While not everyone will fully go through radicalization cycle, the end of the process is typically engagement in violent extremist activities.⁵³ The chances of one completing the radicalization process, developing violent extremist ideologies, and attempting to engage in terrorism are an exceptionally rare combination.⁵⁴ However, in the prison setting, every radicalized inmate becomes a potential terrorist recruit, who should be monitored as so.⁵⁵ Prisons need to prevent radicalization in the first place instead of attempting to combat it once it is too late. Prison staff should familiarize themselves with the push and pull factors of extremism. Inmates’ basic physiological and safety needs must be addressed; inmates should eat, drink, sleep, and have adequate living space. There should be an opportunity for inmates to gain a sense of belonging; outdoor sports, collaborative activities, arts and crafts, or group therapy sessions are some ways to do so. Additionally, self-esteem needs must be met to offset inmate grievances; vocational classes, where they can gain a sense of mastery and independence and allowing inmates room to grow and seek further growth through humane treatment.⁵⁶

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Push Factors

There is a mix of push, pull, and personal factors that drive radicalization. Understanding the factors that promote radicalization in a prison setting can assist in judging the effectiveness of intervention services, analyzing the extent to which they are needed, and determining whether prisons are indeed ‘hotbeds’ of radicalization.⁵⁷ Push factors are the conditions that are conducive to violent extremism.⁵⁸ In prisons, overcrowding caused by mass incarceration, violations of human rights, discrimination, and marginalization are considered push factors. Under-resourced prisons that lack adequate staffing and are overcrowded make it easier for extremist leaders to create social groups and impose their extremist beliefs on the vulnerable.⁵⁹

To lessen the push factors of radicalization, the U.S. prison system has to manage its overcrowding issue by diverting minor cases out of the criminal justice system; creating alternative, constructive sentences rather than using prison as a default sanction, and identifying addiction and mental illness and diverting those identified to the appropriate care.⁶⁰ It is significantly more cost effective to divert minor cases such as low-level drug offenses than incarceration; it would also allow the prison system to channel its financial resources towards institutional improvements.⁶¹ Prisons should also address inmate grievances by improving sanitation and training staff on conflict mediation and basic relational skills.⁶² Ignoring inmate grievances leads to increased frustration and resentment, making one more vulnerable to resorting to ideological violence.⁶³

Pull Factors

Pull factors are individual motivations or psychological processes that play a significant role in terms of nourishing the grievances that lead to violent extremist action.⁶⁴ Pull factors include “individual backgrounds and motivations; collective grievances and victimization stemming from domination, oppression, subjugation or foreign intervention; distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences; and leadership and social networks.”⁶⁵ Upon entry into prison, inmates undergo an experience similar to a culture shock. At once, they are stripped of liberty, autonomy, services, outside relationships, and security, creating a sense of frustration, grievance, and vulnerability. Recruiters seek out the vulnerabilities associated with pull factors and target inmates who display them.⁶⁶

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Since pull factors are largely individual, prisons should focus on education to combat pull factors that lead to radicalization. Often, inmates become involved with extremism to gain a sense of belonging which, though a false narrative, makes involvement seem appealing.⁶⁷ Instead of allowing inmates to seek connection from extremist groups, prisons must provide a counter-narrative and allow inmates to create their own sense of belonging through education, vocational training, or counseling services.⁶⁸

Personal Factors

Personal factors are individual characteristics that are not necessarily connected with cognitive and social processes and structural aspects; they are psychological disorders, personality traits, and traumatic life experiences. Personal factors tend to precede radicalization. However, it is not uncommon for psychological illness to form while an individual is undergoing the radicalization process.⁶⁹ Combatting personal factors in prisons looks different than the other two factors because many inmates enter prison with the personal factors that put them at risk of prison radicalization. Cognitive behavioral therapy, group therapy, and religious counseling are beneficial ways to assist inmates in handling their personal factors. However, it remains necessary to keep counseling services relaxed; when counseling becomes too intense, the inmate might become dissuaded from further participating.⁷⁰

Preparation Inside for Life After Prison

Given that prisons provide a unique environment that makes it easier to disseminate violent and extreme ideologies as well as creates or furthers existing animosity, understanding the push, pull, and personal factors that can drive radicalization is a crucial facet to countering violent extremism in U.S. prisons. Many inmates enter prison with vulnerabilities that further their chances of becoming radicalized. Therefore, the prison system must reinforce the importance of human rights and face the inmates' vulnerabilities head-on.⁷¹

Segregating Violent Extremist Inmates

It remains debatable whether violent extremist inmates should be housed with regular inmates or kept separately. There are benefits and disadvantages to both options, and some countries have attempted both approaches.⁷²



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Keeping violent inmates together can reduce the chances of other inmates becoming radicalized. On the other hand, a significant downfall to the segregation of violent extremist inmates from the rest of the prison population is that it could ultimately amplify radicalization instead of reducing it, creating an echo chamber that assists in planning violent activities inside and outside of prison.⁷³ Segregating violent extremist inmates and those convicted on terrorism-related crimes from the general prison population typically means that they end up in a special housing restrictive unit, where they serve most of their prison sentence in solitary confinement. Syed Hashmi, arrested in 2006 on conspiracy to provide material support to al Qaeda, was separated from the rest of the prison population and held in solitary confinement for three years.⁷⁴

Prolonged isolation can cause extreme mental suffering and is a controversial topic in the criminal justice system.⁷⁵ Housing inmates who do not pose an imminent threat to the rest of the prison population in solitary confinement instead of providing them the proper rehabilitative care can only exacerbate the push and pull factors that drove them to extremism. Segregating violent extremists may seem like the most logical option. However, in the long term, prisons must focus on preparing extremists for life after prison; resourcing and staff training, smart monitoring, strict supervision, and intervention program development will more adequately prepare violent extremist inmates for life post-release.⁷⁶

Cost-Effective Rehabilitative Measures

Rehabilitation and reintegration are two of the most effective tools to fight prison radicalization. Prisons must work to rehabilitate radicalized inmates and violent extremists and ensure that other inmates receive humane treatment. Some cost-efficient activities that prisons can implement to reduce the chances of radicalization are art therapy, which allows inmates to express themselves, provides peace, and allows for the opportunity to create something beautiful; creative writing, which allows inmates to express their pent-up emotions and feelings; and sports, which promotes teamwork, fairness, leadership skills, and can promote positive self-esteem. Inmates are not always comfortable opening up and talking about their feelings; activities as such allow them to do so while also doubling as an anger management resource.⁷⁷

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The Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef Centre for Counselling and Care in Saudi Arabia has observed success using rehabilitative measures such as art therapy, psychotherapy, and sports for its violent extremist and terrorist inmates.⁷⁸ Extremists begin the program while they are still in prison, and inmates must spend at least three months in the facility until they are eligible for assessment for release. Upon release, the inmates then receive after-care to ensure they can reintegrate back into society.⁷⁹ Specialists at the center maintain that there is an 88% success rate among the violent extremists and 138 former al Qaeda members who have completed the program.⁸⁰ However, despite the proclaimed success rate of the facility, the Centre has been subject to criticism. Several critics of the program have mentioned the tendency to promote the values of the Saudi state to the extremists instead of attempting to reeducate and enlightening them of their skewed ideologies.⁸¹ A significant shortcoming of the program is that the success rate mainly pertains to low-profile inmates; there is not much success in deterring hardened extremists from re-engagement post-release.⁸²

Social Reintegration

Reintegration back into society is a critical component in an extremists' transition out of prison. Vocational education must be prioritized alongside rehabilitative efforts; violent extremist inmates must undergo vocational training, which will instill the necessary skills to obtain employment post-release. The first domestic deradicalization program in the U.S. originated in Minnesota, called "Terrorist Disengagement and Deradicalization Program."⁸³ The program can be utilized by violent extremist inmates who need to disengage and reintegrate back into society or as an alternative to serving a prison sentence. Being that extremism is a unique phenomenon, the program provides an initial analysis to all new participants to gain an understanding of their individual radicalization process, the vulnerabilities that led them there, and what issues they may be facing because of it; each participant then receives individualized treatment. The program currently measures success by whether or not its participants complete the treatment if they run into violations post-treatment and whether or not they are in accordance with the conditions of treatment. As time goes on, it will undergo a comprehensive evaluation to gain empirical data on its success rate.⁸⁴

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While many inmates will not need to learn vocational skills, the training can serve as a means to empower inmates, providing them with a sense of purpose.⁸⁵ A key determinant of the successful reintegration of an extremist offender back into society is whether or not the community will accept them upon release. Typically, when there is a negative stigma associated with when the offender is released, there is a greater chance that the offender recidivates and falls back into old behavior patterns. To minimize the chances of recidivism, it is necessary to prepare a safe and trusting social network for the offender to return to upon release.⁸⁶

The Community

While the prison system must prepare violent extremist inmates for a functional life after incarceration, the community, family, and friends of violent extremists also play an invaluable role.⁸⁷ To lessen the chances of recidivism post-release, there should be pre-release interventions made for the violent extremist. Those may include secure housing, as being unable to find appropriate housing increases the chances of recidivism for most criminals. The violent extremist must be prepared to leave prison with the skills necessary to hold a job, and intervention services should assist in the job searching process.⁸⁸ In Indonesia, the Institute for International Peace Building has been successful in connecting former violent extremists with jobs in restaurants. Employment is not only a way for former violent extremists to become financially independent, but it also reduces some of the social stigma associated with being a former extremist through prosocial interactions with community members.⁸⁹ A necessary aspect of disengagement and reintegration is the continuity of care. Prison staff must continue to develop relationships with community service providers that assist in aiding violent extremists in reintegrating back into society.⁹⁰

Families and friends serve as motivating factors for violent extremist inmates. Therefore, it can be beneficial for family and friends to visit an extremist inmate in the weeks leading up to their release. Loved ones can deter the extremist from further engaging in extremist behaviors, provide them with something to look forward to, and become a support system as they adjust from an extended time in prison to life in society.⁹¹ However, as much as relationships can reduce the chances of recidivism upon release, they can also be a contributing factor. Prison staff should conduct risk assessments on violent extremist's loved ones to ensure that they do not harbor similar violent ideologies as the imprisoned inmate. Returning an inmate who is in the process of disengagement and rehabilitation back to those who played a role in the inmate's formation of violent extremist ideology can be counterproductive.⁹²



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Methodology

A Cross-Comparison Look at Countering Extremism and Terrorism

This section entails the methodology incorporated during the research. To understand what the U.S. could better do to combat violent extremism and prison radicalization, both the United Kingdom and Belgium were analyzed in conjunction with the U.S. This section contains evidence-based, qualitative data which observes counterterrorism practices throughout prisons in each of the three countries. In total, 140 documents were utilized and analyzed within this article. The comprehensive look at each country ultimately demonstrated the overarching need for the U.S. to take a proactive stance at combating extremism in prisons across the country. Considering that there was a lack of substantive data on recidivism rates in the locations that have deradicalization and disengagement programming, there is ultimately a need for continued research to measure success rates.

While 9/11 served as a wake-up call to the rising threat of international terrorism, consequently, the threat of domestic right and left wing terrorism in the U.S. silently rose in the background.⁹³ As much as 9/11 spurred a radical shift in the U.S. views and worries regarding safety, security, and privacy, it also inspired the radicalization of other disillusioned individuals.⁹⁴ Now, twenty years later, there has been an uptick in homegrown extremism in the U.S.⁹⁵ Without knowing the true extent of extremists housed in U.S prisons, it is even more crucial to develop effective integrative services to limit the chances of extremist-related violence post-release.⁹⁶

Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Belgium

The small country of Belgium has been deemed Europe's terrorism hotbed.⁹⁷ The country is no stranger to large-scale terrorist attacks. The 2016 airport and metro station bombings in Brussels, which killed 32 people and injured countless others, is just one of the more recent deadly attacks to dismay the country.⁹⁸ The attacks in Brussels were almost entirely carried out by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who returned from Syria.⁹⁹ FTFs remain a significant threat in Belgium; over 400 Belgian citizens have left to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the IS or become further radicalized.

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Presently, 125 FTFs, just under half of the known, have since returned to Belgium.¹⁰⁰ The return of FTFs does not necessitate an impending terrorist attack. It does, however, pose an issue when it comes to the monitoring of the returnee. It is challenging for officials to monitor who the returnees may or may not radicalize, both inside and outside prison.¹⁰¹

In 2018, 44 of the returned FTFs were sentenced to prison, as directed by a strict new law prohibiting the return of individuals from the Middle East, regardless of whether or not they traveled to become fighters.¹⁰² Those deemed the most dangerous were placed in special extremist units, while the others were separated throughout Belgium prisons.¹⁰³ With the surge of returning FTFs into Belgian prisons, there is no feasible way to separate every returnee from the rest of the prison population. Following the Brussels bombings, there have been five terrorist attacks or attempts at attacks, one of which was conducted by a Belgian prisoner who was on a day release from prison. He shot two female officers and a civilian; the attack was afterward claimed by IS.¹⁰⁴ While the attacker was not a returnee, it still demonstrates the challenge of ensuring that Belgian prisons do not become breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism recruitment centers for both returnees and other inmates.¹⁰⁵

Inside Belgium's Prisons

Belgian prisons, which face similar issues as the U.S., have faced criticism for several reasons, overcrowding being one of them. Belgium's prisons are the most overcrowded in the European Union (EU), with 121 inmates per 100 spaces.¹⁰⁶ The immense overcrowding in Belgian prisons is also followed by understaffing and particularly squalor living conditions for the inmates.¹⁰⁷ The country's prison population per 100,000 is 93.6.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, just a few years ago, 450 prisoners in Belgian prisons, or 5 percent of all prisoners, were posed as a radicalization threat. There have also been several instances where jihadists have become radicalized behind bars, to later carry out an attack. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was behind the 2015 IS attack in Paris, is just one example of a Belgian inmate becoming radicalized and resorting to violence.¹⁰⁹

Although there is no typical profile of a terrorist, Belgian security officials are increasingly discovering that Belgian terrorist recruits are coming from a criminal background. Recruits are no longer adopting a radical interpretation of Islam, but instead using Islam to justify their radical behavior.¹¹⁰



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The uptick in IS recruits coming from a criminal background has subsequently spurred the development of the term ‘gangster jihad,’ an individual who shifts from criminal deviancy to terrorism. Gangster jihadis are becoming more commonly observed in Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.¹¹¹ With the development of the gangster jihad, it becomes prudent that Belgian prisons make combatting prison radicalization a top priority.

Belgium's Approach

In 2015, countering the threat of foreign terrorists through prison deradicalization became a top priority for Belgium. The shifted focus to prison deradicalization and combating extremism led to the development of the 2015 Action Plan against radicalization in prisons. The Action Plan policy concentrates on preventing the radicalization of inmates during their imprisonment and monitoring radicalized individuals throughout their time in prison.¹¹² With the looming threat of a potential terrorist attack, Belgium, at one point, housed the highest number of foreign fighters per capita.¹¹³

The concern of growing radicalization in Belgium subsequently inspired a deradicalization strategy. Its deradicalization strategy is now considered one of the most effective in Europe.¹¹⁴ It began with a two-pronged approach to a largely controversial topic: the housing of extremist and radical inmates. While both segregation and cohabitation have implications and benefits, Belgium is attempting to utilize the best of both approaches.¹¹⁵ Inmates who enter prison with extremist views are fused with the general prison population, granted they do not pose a serious threat. Inmates that pose a moderate threat of radicalization will be separated and monitored with intense supervision. In the most extreme cases, where there is a significant threat of radicalization, an inmate will be isolated and moved to a section that focuses specifically on deradicalization.¹¹⁶ Instead of wholly committing to one approach, Belgium utilizes both to maximize positive results. Additionally, extremist offenders are not disregarded once released from prison; after detention, most will be assigned a justice assistant to ensure they adhere to imposed regulations. If conditions are unnecessary, there will be no requirement for a justice assistant. They are, however, available upon request.¹¹⁷

Considering that Belgium's approach to prison deradicalization is a relatively new development, there are finite ways to measure its effectiveness. Nevertheless, it is showing promise.¹¹⁸ In 2018, per the VSSE, over 450 inmates were radicalized or at risk of radicalization.



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However, at the end of 2020, the number of radicalized inmates decreased to 165, a 172.72% reduction.¹¹⁹ Additionally, Belgium employs special programs that assist in combating some of the push and pull factors of extremism, namely issues such as skill development, which assists in developing communication, organization, confidence, and problem-solving skills; mental health, and trauma, all of which aid in provoking behavioral changes in inmates. Belgian prisons are also expected to comply with ethical standards and ensure that inmates voluntarily enter the deradicalization programs. Positive results are likely to yield if inmates show the desire to change their mindset.¹²⁰

A Successful Strategy in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom maintains strong counter-terrorism measures inside and outside of prison. The UK tends to have lesser violent crime rates than both Belgium and the U.S. Between combatting the domestic threat of the IRA since the early 1900s to the constant international threat of terrorism, the UK had no choice but to create strategies to ensure the safety and security of the country's civilians. However, the 2017 suicide bombing at an Ariana Grande concert served as an eyeopener to the prudence of developing an effective counterterrorism strategy. One such strategy focuses on the prevention and intervention aspect of countering terrorism.¹²¹ Thus far, the strategy has been lauded as been successful by some, as from March of 2017 to the present day, authorities have disrupted 28 terrorist plots in the country.¹²²

The UK's counterterrorism strategy's focus on intervention extends to the in-prison handling of violent extremist and terrorist inmates. Those who are convicted on terrorism-related charges face longer sentences with intervention during and after release. There are up to 700 inmates identified as extremists, at risk of radicalization, or who have engaged in a terroristic activity managed throughout prisons in the UK. Each inmates' needs are assessed. They then provide psychological support, educational opportunity, and a range of other intervention services based on their individual needs. The country recognizes the importance of incapacitation in combatting terrorism.¹²³ Yet, incapacitation is merely a starting point, as the inmates will someday be released back into society, demonstrating the significance of utilizing effective intervention services to combat terrorism and extremism in prisons.¹²⁴

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Foreign Terrorist Fighters in the U.S.

The United States has a smaller number of returning foreign fighters when compared to European ally countries.¹²⁵ Since the 2019 fall of the Islamic State, there has been a heightened chance of FTFs attempting to return home to reintegrate back into society. Although it is significantly more challenging for returnees to make an effortless return to the U.S. without repatriation, the U.S., nonetheless, must remain prepared to manage all returnees. Currently, the U.S. does not have a set-in place approach to handling returning FTFs; returnees are prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced on a need-be basis rather than managed systematically.¹²⁶ The de facto response is to instinctively put the FTFs through the criminal justice system, with the expectation of lengthy prison sentences. Nevertheless, the average prison sentence for a returnee in the U.S. is eight years.¹²⁷

In October of 2020, there were around 27 U.S citizens repatriated from Iraq and Syria, 10 of which were sentenced.¹²⁸ Compared to Europe, the U.S. currently has a higher conviction rate for FTFs, but with smaller sentencing and minor charges. From the limited data available, if a returnee becomes deemed high-risk, they will likely receive the bulkier prison sentences. However, for those who are not viewed as high risk or there is insufficient evidence for material support charges, more times than not, non-prosecutorial options are sought.¹²⁹ The handling of women and children FTFs in the U.S. becomes slightly vague, as the U.S. maintains that both women and men returnees from the Islamic State should face prosecution. However, issues arise in understanding whether the returnee holds a violent extremist ideology or is a victim.¹³⁰ Children are always victims, with few exceptions, as they cannot make the informed decision to become involved in terrorism and are often exploited by terrorist groups.¹³¹ To ensure the reformation of FTFs who will not face prison time, disengagement and deradicalization programs outside of prison are a necessity in the U.S.¹³²

A Proactive Approach

As demonstrated in the past, policy change or reformation typically stems from life-changing events.¹³³ For the U.S., 9/11 yielded the Department of Homeland Security.¹³⁴ In Europe, the 2015-2016 attacks in Brussels, Paris, and Berlin carried out by individuals radicalized in prison yielded prison-deradicalization strategies. The United States developed counterterrorism measures based on jihadist or international terrorism, based on the perceived threat level. Likewise, Europe developed strategies to prevent radicalization and violent extremism in prisons to lower the threat of an extremism-related crime post-release.¹³⁵

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Although there has not yet been a terrorism-related large-scale attack perpetrated by individuals radicalized in prison, the U.S. should be proactive and follow the steps of Belgium and the United Kingdom. By not having a unified strategy to address prison radicalization—but instead a few programs offered to assist in rehabilitating violent extremists—there are few ways to mitigate the chances of extremist-related violence post-release. Additionally, the U.S. has the largest prison population, and the pending release of dozens of known extremists is a complicating factor.¹³⁶ Although Belgium is known for being plagued by violent extremists, their attempt at rectifying its extremist problem is evident. Though it is far too soon to measure success, the downward shift in radicalized inmates following Belgium's deradicalization strategy is a promising sign.¹³⁷ With over 1,600 extremist groups currently operating within the U.S., it is prudent that the country takes a proactive approach instead of waiting for the next potentially catastrophic event to develop clear and consistent deradicalization practices within prisons.¹³⁸

Conclusion and Recommendations

In recent years, U.S. prisons have been termed ‘hotbeds’ of radicalization.¹³⁹ In cases where prisons are poorly managed, unsanitary, and understaffed, conditions can be conducive to radicalization into violent extremism.¹⁴⁰ However, well-managed prisons focused on the well-being, rehabilitation, and reintegration of their inmates can have the opposite effect, working as a deterrent away from violent extremism. There are many unknowns regarding violent extremists in U.S. prisons; there is no known number of violent extremist inmates nor a measurable recidivism rate for domestic terrorists and violent extremists in the prison system. The unknowns are not necessarily reflective of the prisons system's rehabilitative efforts, but instead reveal an overarching need for practitioners to dedicate more time and resources reforming and re-socializing violent extremist inmates. Overall, the U.S. is still in its beginning stages of developing a working deradicalization program.¹⁴¹ To effectively combat violent extremism in the prison system, inmate vulnerabilities, push, pull, and personal factors that motivate violent extremism must be addressed. Providing inmates with an environment that is future-focused, respective of growth and development will likely reverse the conditions favorable for the development of violent extremist ideology.¹⁴²



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Proposed recommendations for the U.S. to counter violent extremism in its prisons include thoroughly training staff to manage, handle, and identify special risk inmates such as violent extremists. The funds can be designated to further training prison staff by diverting cases regarding mental illness and low-risk substance abuse charges to the appropriate care; improving the mass incarceration conditions could prove cost effective for the BOP. Prisons should also offer extensive psychotherapy to assist inmates in dealing with unhealed trauma. Allowing inmates expression through the arts or sports is also beneficial.

Violent extremist inmates should also live among the general prison population and allow loved ones who have passed a risk assessment to regularly visit, as social connectedness is a crucial aspect of reintegrating violent extremist inmates back into society. Prisons must also offer extensive vocational and educational training to violent extremist inmates. After all, the end-all is for these inmates to prepare to return violent extremist inmates into society one day. Improving the functionality and countering the violent extremist narrative is essential in yielding a functional and contributing member of society post-release.

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