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Research Methodology

The Prevention Project

Michael Jones and Emily Winterbotham



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Acknowledgements

This paper draws on the methodology primarily designed by Dr Mohammed Elshimi for the Prevention Project. Dr Elshimi has authored a number of reports for the Prevention Project and is currently on secondment to the United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism.

I. Research Methodology: The Prevention Project

IN JANUARY 2018, the Norwegian government commissioned RUSI to lead the Prevention Project, which ran for over two years. The project aims to improve the knowledge base for preventing and countering violent extremist programming.¹ Facing stark conceptual and methodological challenges (outlined in detail below), preventive interventions have generally relied on assumption-based logics with little empirical grounding, exposing the field to a range of theoretical, practical and ethical problems.

By attempting to answer the research question ‘what can work and what has not worked in preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE)?’, the Prevention Project addresses some of these shortfalls, synthesising academic papers, evaluations, policy briefs and internal documents to understand what evidence, if any, exists for the ‘successful’ or effective application of such activities. This process condensed key findings from the literature and interrogated the basis of these findings to critically assess the substance and limitations of the source material with the aim of understanding the effectiveness (or not) of the intervention approaches described in the literature.

The approach to this review involved: 1) identification of search terms and criteria for inclusion and exclusion; 2) identification of potential sources; 3) collection of material related to P/CVE interventions using key search terms; 4) identification of additional material through snowballing; 5) removal of any material that was not relevant to this study and grouping of collected material into the relevant ‘thematic’ categories; 6) scoring of these studies according to their quality and assigning a related grading (high, medium or low quality); and 7) analysis of the documents to diagnose common assumptions or theories of change underpinning each thematic intervention, the validity of these assumptions and the effectiveness (or not) of the intervention described in the document.

From the outset, it is important to highlight that this was not a systematic literature review in the traditional sense. Systematic methods and principles were, however, adopted where possible to improve transparency, rigour and breadth, and to gauge the robustness of available evidence. In contrast to the natural sciences where this approach was pioneered, there is an ‘inherent contradiction’ between the information required to conduct a systematic review and

1. The project drew on previous work conducted with Eric Rosand and the similarly named ‘Prevention Project: Organising Against Violent Extremism’. The collaborative relationship with Eric continued for the duration of this project. For more information, see Organizing Against Violent Extremism, ‘About the Prevention Project’, <<https://organizingagainstve.org/about-the-prevention-project/>>, accessed 30 April 2020.

the structure, variance and content of social science studies.² The reliance on non-positivist, qualitative methodologies which generally define these disciplines creates challenges: commensurate quality appraisal techniques lack consensus and remain relatively undeveloped.³ Systematic reviews have also struggled to adequately capture ‘less tangible, difficult to measure outcomes’, such as those in P/CVE, especially when they are nested in or intersect with wider processes and contextual dynamics.⁴ Greater flexibility was therefore necessary to accommodate these limitations, and this paper describes the methodological approach adopted for this project in full.

The Literary Landscape and its Limitations

P/CVE has been contested and critiqued on numerous fronts, from being overly reactive and externally imposed,⁵ to infringing on civil liberties, unfairly discriminating against ‘suspect communities’,⁶ and producing unintended outcomes and negative externalities.⁷ It has also been accused of lacking a coherent strategy and for being imbued with definitional and conceptual problems.⁸

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2. Richard Mallett et al., ‘The Benefits and Challenges of Using Systematic Reviews in International Development Research’, *Journal of Development Effectiveness* (Vol. 3, No. 3, 2012), pp. 445–55.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. Jon Coaffee and Peter Rogers, ‘Rebordering the City for New Security Challenges: From Counter-Terrorism to Community Resilience’, *Space and Polity* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2008), pp. 101–18.
 6. Imran Awan, ‘“I Am a Muslim Not an Extremist”: How the Prevent Strategy has Constructed a “Suspect” Community’, *Politics and Policy* (Vol. 40, No. 6, 2012), pp. 1158–85; P Thomas, ‘Failed and Friendless: The UK’s “Preventing Violent Extremism” Programme’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (Vol. 12, No. 3, 2010); F Vermeulen, ‘Suspect Communities – Targeting Violent Extremism at the Local Level: Policies of Engagement in Amsterdam, Berlin and London’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 26, No. 2, 2014) pp. 286–306; Arun Kundnani, *Spooked! How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 2009); Charlotte Heath-Kelly, ‘Counter-Terrorism and the Counter-Factual: Producing the Radicalisation Discourse and the UK Prevent Strategy’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (Vol. 15, No. 3, 2012).
 7. Shamim Miah, ‘School Desegregation and the Politics of “Forced Integration”’, *Race & Class* (Vol. 54, No. 2, 2012), pp. 26–38; Froukje Demant and Beatrice de Graaf, ‘How to Counter Radical Narratives: Dutch Deradicalization Policy in the Case of Moluccan and Islamic Radicals’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 33, No. 5, 2010), pp. 408–28; Tahir Abbas, ‘Implementing “Prevent” in Countering Violent Extremism in the UK: A Left-Realist Critique’, *Critical Social Policy* (Vol. 39, No. 3, 2018), pp. 396–412.
 8. J M Berger, ‘Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption’, ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2016, <<https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/J.-M.-Berger-Making-CVE-Work-A-Focused-Approach-Based-on-Process-Disruption-.pdf>>, accessed 11 March 2020.

A Confused Vocabulary

P/CVE is generally considered to be a broad umbrella term to ‘categorise activities implemented by governmental and non-governmental actors seeking to prevent or mitigate violent extremism through non-coercive measures that are united by the objective of addressing the drivers of violent extremism’.⁹ However, linguistic ambiguities and connotations are widespread in the P/CVE space. This is in large part because many stakeholders tend to use ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE) and ‘preventing violent extremism’ (PVE) interchangeably, arguing that there is little difference in objectives, mechanisms or actions between the two.¹⁰ Some development organisations, practitioners and scholars may opt for the PVE label to help distinguish upstream preventive approaches from any ‘security driven framework’,¹¹ criticising CVE as a vehicle for ‘securitising’ civic domains, such as healthcare, social work and education, and highlighting the term’s genesis in the US-led ‘Global War on Terror’.¹² However, the lack of a consistent definition means it is not possible to draw comparisons between the relative benefits of preventing or countering approaches.

Even within the UN system there are significant discrepancies: for instance, the Security Council’s Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate and the United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism use the terms ‘CVE’ and ‘PVE’ respectively, despite sharing a relatively homogenous understanding of the steps necessary to diminish the threat of violent extremism (VE). Both agencies also occasionally conflate these appellations as P/CVE, exemplifying the inconsistency in the application of terminology.

This contestation extends to the adjunct processes of radicalisation and recruitment. The former has various definitions but is generally understood as the ‘social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist ideologies’.¹³ This is considered to be a fluid, non-linear and largely idiosyncratic process that affects people in different ways, and does not necessarily imply the adoption of violent behaviour. Instead, radicalisation involves a transition from ‘relatively mainstream beliefs’ to seeking some ‘drastic’ social and/or political change, which may or may not involve violence.¹⁴ Despite the tendency to frame radicalisation

9. Eric Rosand et al., ‘A Roadmap to Progress: The State of the Global P/CVE Agenda’, The Prevention Project and RUSI, September 2018, p. 4.

10. Rosand et al., ‘A Roadmap to Progress’.

11. William Stephens, Stijn Sieckelinck and Hans Boutellier, ‘Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2 January 2019, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1543144>>, accessed 30 April 2020; Lynn Davies, ‘Security, Extremism and Education: Safeguarding or Surveillance?’, *British Journal of Educational Studies* (Vol. 64, No. 1, 2016), pp. 1–19.

12. *Ibid.*

13. John Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

14. Mohammed Elshimi et al., ‘Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia’, *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2018), p. 9.

as a recognisable and consistent phenomenon, it is a concept that is often applied loosely to an eclectic mix of cases and situations.¹⁵

In contrast, Edgar Jones describes recruitment as a ‘dynamic process by which a willing or unwilling individual is encouraged or dissuaded from joining a group; it involves a measure of assessment on both sides’.¹⁶ This is therefore distinct from, but may overlap with, the ‘belief modification’ associated with radicalisation.¹⁷

Conceptual Problems

Crucially, P/CVE also faces constraints and ambiguities as VE ‘cannot be neatly packaged’¹⁸ due to its discrete iterations and drivers, leading to a myriad of potentially relevant intervention types, including: community debates on sensitive topics; media messaging; interfaith dialogues; empowerment programmes (particularly of women); training of government and security officials; and programmes aimed at individuals deemed to be ‘at risk’ of joining or being attracted to violent extremist groups. Consequently, ‘prevention’ risks become a ‘catch-all category’ that conflates with ‘well-established fields, such as development and poverty alleviation, governance and democratization, and education’.¹⁹ The mislabelling and ‘re-hatting’ of development interventions alongside the covert nature of many preventive activities accentuates this problem, making it difficult to systematically identify P/CVE programming in both theory and practice.

This is compounded by the amorphous nature of VE itself, a phenomenon that is difficult to clearly differentiate from a wider spectrum of violent action, from insurgencies to pogroms and local riots. The UN has notably failed to develop any universally recognised definition of either ‘violent extremism’ or ‘terrorism’,²⁰ and delineations made in the literature are typically context-dependent and often contradictory, especially given the sensitivities and politicisation of such labels. Afghanistan, for instance, is considered an important arena for preventive interventions,²¹ but staple case studies in conflict analysis, such as Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and Colombia rarely appear in the P/CVE discourse, despite all four appearing as comparative examples for assessing counterterrorism, disengagement and deradicalisation. This disjuncture

15. RUSI, ‘Countering Violent Extremism Curriculum’.

16. Edgar Jones, ‘The Reception of Broadcast Terrorism: Recruitment and Radicalisation’, *International Review of Psychiatry* (Vol. 29, No. 4, 2017), p. 322.

17. Peter R Neumann, ‘The Trouble with Radicalization’, *International Affairs* (Vol. 89, No. 4, 2013), pp. 873–93.

18. Georgia Holmer, ‘Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective’, Special Report No. 336, United States Institute of Peace, September 2013, p. 4.

19. Steven Heydemann, ‘State of the Art: Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice’, *Insights* (Vol. 1, Spring 2014), p. 1; Stephens, Sieckelink and Boutellier, ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’.

20. Rosand et al., ‘A Roadmap to Progress’.

21. Reza Fazli, Casey Johnson and Peyton Cooke, ‘Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan’, Special Report No. 379, United States Institute of Peace, September 2015.

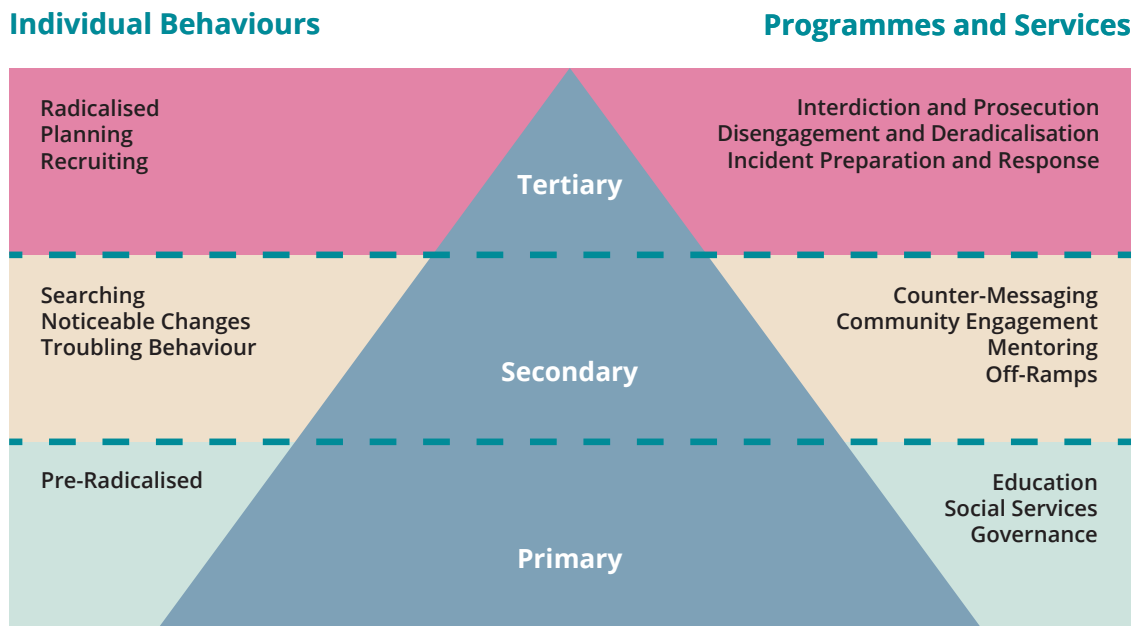
exposes clear discursive, conceptual and theoretical problems with ‘violent extremism’ as a distinct analytical category due to its overlap with wider conflict ecologies.

The genealogy of P/CVE as a concept and a policy domain are also inextricably tied to ‘Islamist-based terrorism’ given its association with the ‘Global War on Terror’. It has since grown in both popularity and scope, integrating other manifestations of VE, such as white supremacy and residual strands of neo-fascism. Nevertheless, there continues to be a disproportionate focus on violent ‘jihadism’, meaning the true breadth of extremist militancy, replete with its numerous derivatives and sub-categories, is rarely represented in the literature.²²

In such a confused context, the ‘public health model’²³ has become an increasingly prominent method for organising and reinterpreting P/CVE activity and agency, drawing on tested approaches for triaging ‘disease responses’ and healthcare. There are various iterations of this framework,²⁴ but they generally distinguish between three levels of intervention: primary; secondary; and tertiary. Figure 1 demonstrates the authors’ approach to the model adopted for this research project.

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22. This disparity appears to be less pronounced in the ‘deradicalisation’ literature, where there has been a prominent strand of academic and practical engagement with demobilising members of far-right groups.
 23. There are numerous examples of the public health model framework. See, for instance, Jonathan Challgren et al., ‘Countering Violent Extremism: Applying the Public Health Model’, Center for Security Studies, Georgetown University, October 2016.
 24. Some versions add a fourth level – ‘primordial’ prevention – at the base of the pyramid, meaning social and economic policies which affect health.

Figure 1: The Public Health Model for P/CVE



Source: Adapted from Jonathan Challgren et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism: Applying the Public Health Model', Center for Security Studies, Georgetown University, October 2016.

- **Primary:** Broad-based and community-focused prevention programmes addressing a range of social ills including, but not specifically focusing on, factors contributing to radicalisation and/or recruitment into VE.
- **Secondary:** P/CVE activities that either target populations/individuals identified as being 'at risk' or vulnerable to radicalisation and/or recruitment, or address individual incentives, enabling factors and structural motivators contributing to VE. This category has been expanded from the original model proposed by Jonathan Challgren and colleagues, described as activities focused towards 'individuals and groups identified as at-risk for violent extremism'.²⁵ The addition of interventions that include P/CVE objectives in their explicit or implicit theory of change and/or those addressing factors specifically contributing to recruitment and radicalisation helps reflect contextual and programmatic heterogeneity in what is a sprawling, largely ill-defined domain.
- **Tertiary:** Engaging individuals who have already joined terrorist groups or are identified as violent extremists, these activities typically include disengagement, deradicalisation, isolation and redirection, or counterterrorism.

This is not a perfect typology, especially given the porosity of its conceptual boundaries and potential inconsistencies when applied across heterogeneous contexts, which introduces a degree of subjectivity when distinguishing between tiers. Nevertheless, the model is useful

25. Challgren et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism'.

for reconfiguring an otherwise convoluted P/CVE sector, highlighting the goals, mechanisms and target audiences of various activities as they respond to different stages of radicalisation and recruitment,²⁶ and demonstrating how they interact and synchronise with one another.²⁷

Problems in Data Collection and Quality

Stakeholders working in the P/CVE space have long described a general lack of good-quality data, especially in relation to monitoring and evaluation. For instance, the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism found only five studies reporting outcome data assessing preventive programmes/interventions between 2005 and 2015,²⁸ and other studies highlight both the limited availability and questionable quality of a large proportion of P/CVE content.²⁹ This is the result of various methodological restrictions that are not unique to the P/CVE space³⁰ but remain pronounced:

- **Problems of Attribution:** The programmatic logic of a preventive intervention or its 'theory of change' can often become incoherent if it extends too far upstream, as the pathway from delivery to impact of end-target groups is increasingly contorted or

26. This does not imply any linear relationship between different stages but simply reflects the intensity of cognitive and/or behavioural change within individuals during their own specific trajectory of radicalisation and/or recruitment.

27. Challgren et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism'.

28. Caitlin Mastroe and Susan Szmania, 'Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement and Deradicalization Programs', National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, University of Maryland, March 2016.

29. Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, 'Countering Radicalization in Europe', International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2012; Amy-Jane Gielen, 'Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances and How?', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 31, No. 6, 2019), pp. 1149–67.

30. Similar challenges have long characterised peacebuilding and development, but they seem amplified in the context of P/CVE in part because of its relative immaturity, politicisation and conceptual ambiguities. While guidance to help avoid 'reinventing the wheel' is available and the prevention space has become increasingly saturated with toolkits and manuals for improving monitoring and evaluation, robust publicly available data remains sparse. Valuable examples include Lillie Ris and Anita Ernstorfer, 'Borrowing a Wheel: Applying Existing Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Strategies to Emerging Programming Approaches to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism', Briefing Paper, Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium, March 2017; Lucy Holdaway and Ruth Simpson, 'Improving the Impact of Preventing Violent Extremism Programming: A Toolkit for Design, Monitoring and Evaluation', International Alert and UNDP, 2018; European Commission, 'Operational Guidelines on the Preparation and Implementation of EU Financed Actions Specific to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Third Countries', RUSI, CIVI.POL and the European Commission, 2018.

convoluted.³¹ Understanding and tracing these relationships within a litany of variables is difficult, especially when evaluators cannot disaggregate the specific impact of a project from other activities conducted in the same space, or segregate any effect from concurrent shifts in the wider milieu. This leaves attribution difficult to establish, with the lack of short, manageable causal chains making it challenging to exclude rival explanations for a specific trend or effect.³² Moreover, intended outcomes in P/CVE usually involve ‘nothing happening’, for example, the absence of radicalisation and recruitment. Assessing the mechanics of interventions is therefore problematic as any metric relies on an imperfect set of proxies to ‘prove a negative’, particularly as ethical constraints in complex and challenging contexts usually preclude any comparison between treatment and control groups.

- **Indicators of Success:** Given the diversity of focus areas, confused or contested models of radicalisation, and congruently vague policy objectives, it is hard to formulate indicators of success that relate concrete measures to impact on beneficiaries.³³ Many expected outcomes in P/CVE involve ephemeral changes related to cognition, perception and opinion, which are challenging to track, especially with a paucity of secure baselines for comparison.
- **Operational Challenges:** Stakeholders are often reticent to divert resources away from core programming and there is little appetite on the part of local practitioners to publicise their ‘failures’ as this could compromise future funding opportunities.³⁴ Similarly, evaluations are encumbered by the immaturity of preventive projects: many long-term interventions have not yet concluded, and completed programmes are frequently designed with short time horizons, limiting avenues for longer-term or longitudinal analyses. Information sharing also relies on a culture of transparency and receptivity, which is difficult to manage when data is sensitive, securitised or heavily regulated.³⁵

Consequently, monitoring and evaluation in the field of P/CVE tends to concentrate more on programmatic outputs to demonstrate the functionality and efficiency of individual activities. These results are usually difficult to generalise and offer little substantive assessment on the effectiveness of projects beyond superficial benchmarks that do not account for externalities or indirect and long-term impact.³⁶ Where attempts are made to enumerate outcome-level findings, data is often ‘anecdotal and descriptive’, making inferences about effectiveness that are conjectural, ‘dependent on narrative interpretation’ and ‘difficult to validate’.³⁷

31. Lasse Lindekilde, ‘Value for Money? Problems of Impact Assessment of Counter-Radicalisation Policies on End Target Groups: The Case of Denmark’, *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* (Vol. 18, No. 4, 2012), pp. 385–402.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Rosand et al., ‘A Roadmap to Progress’.

35. Peter Romaniuk, ‘Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism’, Global Center on Cooperative Security, September 2015.

36. Lindekilde, ‘Value for Money?’.

37. *Ibid.*

Given these limitations, it is therefore important that any enquiry into what can work and what has not worked in the P/CVE space establishes how robust the evidence base actually is, identifying not only what the literature claims but interrogating what these claims are based on.

Methodological Approach

As noted at the beginning of this paper, there were seven stages to the literature review. These are outlined in detail below.

1. Search Terms and Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

As part of the literature review for this project, the team designed a set of inclusion/exclusion criteria that would ensure adequate coverage in its data-collection:

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Geographical Locations	All	N/A
Language	English	Other languages
Conceptual Focus	Only P/CVE interventions aimed at the secondary level of the adapted public health model, defined as: 1) interventions that label themselves as PVE, CVE or P/CVE, counter-radicalisation, etc.; 2) interventions that identify factors of VE and how they will address these; and 3) interventions that identify 'at-risk' and 'vulnerable' populations or individuals.	Interventions that do not satisfy these criteria, primary and tertiary-level interventions (for example, deradicalisation, disengagement and reintegration).
Types of VE	All types	N/A
Publication Date	2005–present	Pre-2005
Publication Format	1) Peer-reviewed academic outputs, including journal articles, working papers, e-books and other online resources, and other academic outputs; 2) grey literature, including discussion papers, policy briefs, journalistic accounts, conference papers, good practice guidelines and toolkits; and 3) evaluations assessing impact, including independent and self-evaluations.	N/A

Source: Table generated by authors based on the team's inclusion/exclusion criteria.

As noted in Table 1, only publications that focused on interventions falling within the secondary level of the authors' adapted public health model were included. While there are overlaps with other tiers, the huge suite of activities included in primary-level programming, and their often-convoluted relationship with VE as a specific social ill, is beyond the scope of this project. Tertiary interventions engage those who are already violent extremists and subscribe to a distinct set of logics, mechanisms and processes. As a result, this category was also excluded to prioritise a focus on prevention work.

While inconsistencies in the labels of both radicalisation and recruitment have been highlighted, programmes were included in this review irrespective of their chosen definitions for one or both processes, as long as the programme itself aligned with secondary-level criteria enumerated in the public health model. This is largely because the Prevention Project sought to accurately interrogate the literature within its own self-defined parameters and was therefore forced to replicate any discrepancies it found when mapping the P/CVE 'evidence base'.

2. Identification of Potential Sources

Having defined the inclusion/exclusion criteria, the team's experience, contact networks and well-known P/CVE knowledge hubs were leveraged to map out sources for a multi-track data-collection process. As outlined below, these not only included 'traditional peer review storage systems' but also 'alternative channels' to ensure adequate coverage of grey literature and other content typically omitted from the conventional 'information architecture' characterising both P/CVE and the wider development space.³⁸

- **Online search engines**, including JSTOR, Science Direct, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and British Library catalogues.
- **Official websites of international and regional donors**, such as the UN, the EU, the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund and various European, Middle Eastern, Asian and African governments, alongside the US and Canada.
- **Websites of key stakeholders, NGOs and practitioners**, such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Mercy Corps, International Alert, Search for Common Ground, Overseas Development Institute, the British Council, CIVI.POL, the Global Center on Cooperative Security, and the Anti-Violent Extremism Network, among many others.

38. Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Richard Mallett, 'How to Do a Rigorous, Evidence-Focused Literature Review in International Development', Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), September 2013.

3. Collection of Material Related to P/CVE Interventions Using Key Search Terms

A list of 'search terms' was then developed, with the emphasis on P/CVE to avoid an overwhelming number of responses. As highlighted in the inclusion/exclusion criteria, the explicit inclusion of P/CVE terminology allowed a prioritisation of those studies that specifically focused on the issue of VE rather than wider development and peacebuilding issues.

Table 2: Search Terms

Search Terms 1	PVE, CVE, P/CVE, counter-radicalisation, prevent [prevention], 'preventing violent extremism', 'countering violent extremism'
Search Terms 2	evaluate [evaluating/evaluate/evaluation], impact, evidence, review; effective [effective/effectiveness], ineffective [ineffective/ineffectiveness], challenges, success [successes/successful], failure [failed/failing]
Logical Operators	And/Or

Source: Table generated by authors based on the team's chosen search terms.

4. Identification of Additional Material Through Snowballing

This was supplemented with a series of forward and backward snowballing processes. Using the references and bibliographies of collected papers, any relevant studies omitted from the initial search were identified and several P/CVE experts were contacted for further direction and suggestions. Hand searches were subsequently conducted on Google to capture any remaining documents, particularly 'non-academic' articles, newly released studies and content on preventive work (either explicitly working with vulnerable individuals susceptible to recruitment and/or radicalisation or tackling any drivers/factors identified as contributing to VE) without clear labelling of these efforts as P/CVE interventions.

5. Removal of Any Material that was Not Relevant to this Study and Grouping of Collected Material into 'Thematic' Categories

These documents were individually screened by each team member to ensure the satisfaction of inclusion criteria. Any documents that did not meet the inclusion criteria were removed at this stage. The remaining documents were divided into the specific types of thematic intervention that were dictated by the reviewed literature: 'women-focused interventions'; 'religiously based mechanisms'; 'education'; 'mentorship'; 'P/CVE communications'; 'youth empowerment'; 'social cohesion/resilience'; 'economic empowerment'; and 'human rights and law enforcement'. In practice, many of these interventions are overlapping – for example, documents addressing mentorship programmes can also explore how critical thinking programmes are used in education. Therefore, certain studies overlapped between categories, especially those examining multiple or multifaceted programmes. Accordingly, these articles were scored once and integrated across the relevant thematic papers.

6. Scoring of These Studies According to Their Quality and Assigning a Related Grade (High, Medium, Low)

The articles were then classified through a rapid evidence assessment to score each paper's 'quality'. Quality was assessed according to a fixed set of criteria: conceptual framing, transparency, method, research design, internal validity, and cogency, replete with a series of sub-questions as detailed below.³⁹

Table 3: Quality Scoring Criteria

Scoring	Category	Sub-Category
3	Conceptual Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the study acknowledge existing research? Does the study lay out assumptions and describe how they think about an issue? Does the study pose a research question or outline a hypothesis?
3	Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the geography/context in which the study was conducted? Does the study present or link to the raw data it analyses?
3	Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the study identify a research method? Does the study demonstrate why the chosen design and method are well suited to the research question?
3	Research Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the study employ primary research methods? Does the study employ secondary research methods? Does the study rely exclusively on a theoretical or conceptual premise? (As explained in DFID's 'How to Note', 'most studies (primary and secondary) include some discussion of theory, but some focus almost exclusively on the construction of new theories rather than generating, or synthesising empirical data'.)
3	Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is the study internally valid for achieving its objectives?
3	Cogency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the author 'signpost' the reader throughout? To what extent does the author consider the study's limitations and/or alternative interpretations of the analysis? Are the conclusions clearly based on the study's results?
1	Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the assessment conducted by an independent party (to those conducting the intervention itself)?

Source: Based on the 'Principles of Quality' from DFID's 'How to Note' (p. 14) but adapted to reflect the scoring criteria for the 'Prevention Project'.

39. The criteria used to assess quality drew on an adapted version of the Department for International Development's (DFID) 'good practice' criteria. See DFID, 'How to Note: Assessing the Strength of Evidence', last updated 19 March 2014, <www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-note-assessing-the-strength-of-evidence>, accessed 16 March 2020.

Aside from the ‘independence’ category, which entailed a binary score of 0 or 1, the articles were assigned a value of 0 (absent) to 3 (strong) for each category. Team members swapped and re-scored samples of the documents to control for human bias, subjectivity and variation where possible. Once the articles were scored, the scores were aggregated and each paper was given a quality grading. Scores of 0–9 were graded as ‘low quality’; 10–14 were ‘moderate quality’; and 15–19 were considered ‘high quality’.

Two important aspects to this process need to be noted. First, quality was not an inclusion criterion in this study. Instead, the decision was deliberately taken to focus on quantity over quality in order to develop an evidence base. The quality grading was used during the analysis process to understand the weight and significance to ascribe to each paper’s findings and conclusions. Second, although quality was taken into account in the analytical process, the authors have refrained from associating (public) gradings to each reviewed study in the publication series out of respect for the work of other scholars in the field. It is also acknowledged that the grading system may have certain biases, as explained below.⁴⁰

7. Analysis of the Documents in Order to Identify Common Assumptions, Assess the Validity of These Assumptions and the Effectiveness (or Not) of the Intervention Approach Described

Once the literature was graded, the documents were analysed to diagnose common assumptions or theories of change of each thematic intervention. The validity of these assumptions was subsequently explored using the evidence presented in the different papers. This includes an interrogation of the claims made in the articles – for example, were their claims substantiated by the data presented? Were any conclusions commensurate with the evidence presented in the study? What assumptions or conclusions were not verified?

During this interrogation, the research team assessed whether the assumptions underpinning the intervention(s) were valid and effective. This assessment was based on: the study’s own assessment of impact, if available; an analysis of the evidence or data presented to support this

40. Anyone interested in obtaining information on these gradings for educational or research purposes can contact the authors directly for more information.

assessment; and the quality grading of each paper. Each paper was then coded as ‘effective’, ‘potentially effective’, ‘mixed’, ‘ineffective’ or ‘inconclusive’:⁴¹

- Studies identifying a positive impact in relation to specific P/CVE objectives that could either be traced back to the contributions of a specific project, or causally attributed to an intervention, were regarded as ‘effective’.⁴²
- Studies that based conclusions on intermediate outcomes or anecdotal evidence of success were regarded as ‘potentially effective’.
- Studies that found that interventions produced both positive and negative results were categorised as ‘mixed’.
- Studies concluding that the intervention failed to produce the desired results were regarded as ‘ineffective’, while studies with an absence of any clear findings or those describing a project’s results as ambiguous were deemed ‘inconclusive’.

A tabulated summary of the team’s assessment of the evidence base for each thematic category, based on the aggregation of both ‘quality’ and ‘effectiveness’ assessments, are included in each thematic paper in this publication series.

There are nine thematic publications in this study as dictated by the literature gathered. These explore: ‘women-focused interventions’; ‘religiously based mechanisms’; ‘education’; ‘mentorship’; ‘P/CVE communications’; ‘youth empowerment’; ‘social cohesion/resilience’; ‘economic empowerment’; and ‘human rights and law enforcement’.

These are accompanied by two case studies exploring P/CVE in practice in Kenya and Lebanon. These countries were selected as areas where there has been a saturation of P/CVE activities and interest from a range of donors, including the Norwegian government. RUSI also has a strong foothold in Kenya given its office in Nairobi, which leads a P/CVE programme – STRIVE (Strengthening Resilience against Violent Extremism) II.⁴³ The two case studies will detail whether and how primary research fed into the results of the analysis exploring P/CVE interventions in practice in each country.

41. Our definition of (in)effectiveness drew on OECD, ‘Evaluation Criteria’, <<https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>>, accessed 15 March 2020. However, given that significant numbers of the reviewed studies were not evaluations, the categories of effectiveness and ineffectiveness were expanded to include ‘potentially effective’, ‘mixed’ and ‘inconclusive’. This is in line with a similar analysis into the effectiveness of conflict prevention programmes in C Cramer, J Goodhand and R Morris, *Evidence Synthesis: What Interventions Have Been Effective in Preventing or Mitigating Armed Violence in Developing and Middle-Income Countries?* (London: DFID, 2016).

42. OECD, ‘Evaluation Criteria’.

43. RUSI, ‘Strive for Development: Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism’, 2017, <<https://rusi.org/projects/strive-horn-africa>>, accessed 5 February 2020.

A concluding paper synthesised the learning from each report in order to answer the question driving this research: ‘what can work and what has not worked in P/CVE?’. This final study includes constructive recommendations for policymakers, donors and civil society organisations operating in the field.

Results and Challenges

To date, the team has collated 463 unique publications, with a current breakdown listed in the tables below:⁴⁴

Table 4: Type of Publication and Number of Studies

Type of Publication	Number of Studies
Academic Study	153 (33%)
Programme Evaluation	99 (21%)
Research Report	93 (20%)
Conference Report	15 (3%)
Policy Report	76 (16%)
Commentary	23 (5%)
Blog	4 (1%)

Source: Authors' research.

Table 5: Research Data Type and Number of Studies

Research Data Type	Number of Studies
Primary	190 (41%)
Secondary	192 (42%)
Theoretical/Conceptual	81 (17%)

Source: Authors' research.

Table 6: Research Methods and Number of Studies

Research Methods	Number of Studies
Qualitative	285 (62%)
Quantitative	9 (2%)
Mixed Methods	79 (17%)
No Methodology Given (N/A)	90 (20%)

Source: Authors' research.

44. Please note that this number is likely to increase to over 500 given that further snowballing of data related to several thematic P/CVE intervention areas will still take place.

Table 7: Research Design and Number of Studies

Research Design	Number of Studies
Experimental (Primary)	8 (2%)
Quasi-Experimental (Primary)	4 (1%)
Observational (Primary)	157 (34%)
Systematic Review (Secondary)	6 (1%)
Other Review (Secondary)	160 (35%)
No Design Given (N/A)	128 (28%)

Source: Authors' research.

The design and application of this approach was not without challenges, and the team concedes that despite subjecting its methodology to critical review by P/CVE experts in a consultative workshop convened by RUSI in February 2018, the project may still have been susceptible to some shortfalls and inconsistencies.

The team appreciated the difficulties of sourcing data from the outset but were hopeful that there may be greater stakeholder appetite to share information given repeated calls for greater transparency and exchange from donors and practitioners. Despite formal requests to at least 10 donors, none shared unpublished evaluation material. Acknowledgement and thanks for their valuable contribution go to some civil society organisations and research institutes that did provide access to internal documentation. Nevertheless, the dearth of material was problematic.

Given the lack of available peer-reviewed and public evaluations, grey literature was included to accurately reflect the complexion of the P/CVE evidence base. Integrating 'non-academic' material, such as journalistic accounts, policy briefs, presentations, practitioner reports and good practice/toolkit documents, allowed a dynamic assessment of prevention activities and facilitated a more in-depth analysis of what was perceived to have 'worked' or 'not worked'. Crucially, it also enabled the identification and tracking of common assumptions referenced and recycled throughout the literature to understand if there is any empirical evidence to substantiate such claims.

Nevertheless, this approach did present challenges. For example, collating relevant grey literature was difficult due to the sheer scope and diversity of content. It was also widely dispersed, making it hard to capture in a comprehensive and systematic way. While the team tried to mitigate these challenges with hand searches, snowballing and our own expert knowledge of P/CVE information sources, it is possible some valuable content may have been inadvertently omitted.

The reliance on English-language documentation likely distorted the review's findings, creating a potential bias towards Anglophonic scholarship and expertise largely situated in Western (high-income) countries. Consequently, the study's geographic coverage may not necessarily reflect the true breadth of the P/CVE space, although it is noted that many authors write in English, and donor- and government-funded publications are frequently translated. This means

that important interventions taking place in non-English-speaking countries have largely been captured. However, reductionism may still have been a problem given the challenges of including innovative or effective activities outside mainstream sources and search engines, especially locally led initiatives at the grassroots level that often receive little external attention and rarely have the capacity or budget to publish or disseminate their monitoring/evaluation outputs.

Relying on institutional and organisational websites also potentially undermined the objectivity of the search and retrieval process by introducing a degree of human bias.⁴⁵ As Richard Mallett and colleagues argue, divergent search functions and the unintentional exclusion of relevant sites means ‘potentially high numbers of pertinent studies can be missed’.⁴⁶ Using the team’s subject-matter expertise, an extensive stakeholder mapping was conducted to mitigate any oversights, but the scope and opacity of the P/CVE space created significant challenges.

Moreover, systematically distinguishing between primary and secondary-level interventions remained difficult, with certain studies requiring ad hoc arbitration by the team to see if it satisfied the inclusion criteria. These issues are clearly demonstrated in the inclusion of education-based interventions: although activities in the education space are rarely targeted at ‘vulnerable’ audiences and often engage all school-aged youth. As such, it could be considered a primary intervention. Yet, education initiatives included in this review described themselves as P/CVE interventions on the basis that the lack of education is a possible structural factor contributing to VE, radicalisation and recruitment. Even if we subsequently assessed that the projects described were primary-level interventions, they were still included on the basis of our inclusion criteria: they described themselves as P/CVE activities. In contrast, broader programmes tackling racism, bullying or civic awareness with no reference to VE or radicalisation were omitted.

Similarly, the team repeatedly cross-checked the scores of each article to limit any variance, but due to the discretionary and subjective nature of the quality scoring process, imperfection and bias were inexorable. While the quality scoring framework was adapted from DFID’s good practice for evidence assessment, there is also an implicit bias towards peer-reviewed academic content. The citation of existing literature, the specification of research methods and the emphasis on independence and empiricism in a given study are important traits and certainly strengthen its authority, but programmatic evaluations, for example, are not necessarily designed for this purpose. The premise of this method may therefore unfairly score papers that do not meet these criteria, enumerating scores that do not necessarily represent their quality or strength.

Finally, the paucity of independent evaluations and peer-reviewed material has challenged the methodological rigour of the analysis. The approach aimed to mitigate some of these problems, but the team acknowledges that conclusions have sometimes failed to be drawn or have been formed on partial data and are therefore liable to be subjective. As such, all findings need to

45. Mallett et al., ‘The Benefits and Challenges of Using Systematic Reviews in International Development’, p. 449.

46. *Ibid.*

be viewed cautiously and as an attempt to contribute towards emerging efforts to build the evidence base for research in the field of P/CVE.

Nevertheless, this project provides a valuable resource aimed at strengthening the knowledge base in prevention work, navigating where possible the conceptual, methodological and practical problems prevalent in the P/CVE space, and contributing to improvements in future programming.

About the Authors

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