

## Evidence or Instinct? An Overview of International Exploration of the Impact Assessment Practices of Intervention Providers Supporting Leaving Extremism<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Despite the increasing need for tertiary prevention programme interventions, knowledge is lacking on which methods used in programmes work and which do not. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve practitioners and combination of grounded theory and reflexive thematic analysis, this article explores: how do tertiary prevention intervention providers measure the progress or regression of participants; how do tertiary prevention intervention providers measure the impact of programmes; and what is the reasoning for not practising impact assessment. The results show that 50% of the interviewed practitioners measure participant progress with standardised tools or set criteria. To measure participant progress, practitioners employ screening, needs assessment, indicators of change, and standardised tools. Programme development is tracked through monitoring or evaluation conducted by an outside evaluator or funder. Intervention providers prefer not to conduct impact assessment for various reasons, including their academic background that pushes them away from available instruments, feeling that currently available tools are not reliable or a tendency to work based on professional intuition. They hesitate to guarantee results due to fear of losing funding or credibility if a participant relapses and re-engages. Last, this article brings out practitioners' perspectives that highlight not only current practices but also several gaps in the field that need further research.

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### Introduction

Tertiary prevention programme interventions are part of the standard preventing and countering extremism (P/CVE) activities and, depending on their focus, support processes such as deradicalisation, disengagement, reintegration, and rehabilitation. Due to a growing need, the number of deradicalisation – a social and psychological process resulting in attitudinal change and developing a new identity (Schuurman and Bakker, 2015, p 68;

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Mattsson and Johansson, 2019, p 189) – and disengagement – a process of leaving an extremist movement or terminating membership that can include behavioural and cognitive changes (Morrison *et al.*, 2021) – programmes have increased worldwide significantly in recent years and have become a part of the standard counterterrorism and conflict resolution repertoire (Koehler and Fiebig, 2019). As the importance of programme interventions increases due to security risks and often gaining funding from public sources, it is necessary to critically question the exact impact of intervention programmes on participants to understand whether the programmes are achieving the expected outcomes.

There are three main gaps and challenges that affect practitioners with measuring impact of their interventions: lack of clarity on whether interventions do the work that is expected of them; available impact assessment approaches and instruments tend to be unused or unsuitable for tertiary prevention programme interventions; and practitioners not implementing recommendations. The following sections describe the gaps in more detail.

1) Lack of clarity on whether interventions do the work that is expected of them

Marsden (2017) has emphasised that, although the history of programmes is short, the nature of the programmes is heterogeneous. Many approaches are used in the field to implement or deliver interventions to support tertiary prevention. Some interventions put emphasis on specific activities or approaches to achieve their aims, like football (Abdulsalam, Theeboom and Coalter, 2023) or critical thinking skills and tolerance of ambiguity (Jugl, 2022). Others address a wide scope of vulnerabilities of objectives, for instance, providing help with accessing psychological aid, employment, housing, legal support, healthcare, and education (Savoia *et al.*, 2022) or conducting activities that support the fulfilment of aims such as ideological reappraisal, the experience of acceptance, systematic stabilisation, and strengthening life management (Lautz *et al.*, 2023).

There are general overviews of the intervention approaches and methods used by programme interventions (Savoia, 2022) as well as insights into the approaches of specific countries (for example Muluk, Umam and Milla, 2019; Hettiarachchi, 2013). Nevertheless, there is no clarity on whether interventions do the work that is expected of them. For instance,

Savoia *et al.* (2022) note that while interventions employ social work and psychotherapy to resolve psychosocial issues, the link between the immediate goal of resolving a client's issues and preventing terrorism remains largely unclear.

- 2) Available impact assessment approaches and instruments tend to be unused or unsuitable for tertiary prevention programme interventions

To support impact measuring, there are several indicators and tools created for measuring participant progress – recidivism and risk assessment tools and instruments – and evaluating programme interventions – theory or change, measuring changes in extreme group membership, and evaluation types. The following sections provide an overview of the main instruments and their suitability for interventions.

### *Recidivism*

Recidivism rates are often used to measure the success of deradicalisation and disengagement programmes (Daugherty, 2019). For example, The Unity Initiative in the UK claims to have successfully reintegrated over 50 released terrorist prisoners, with none reoffending (Stern and Pascarelli, 2019). Recidivism is an inadequate measure for assessing the impact of programmes for three reasons.

First, the factors driving terrorist re-engagement and recidivism are poorly understood, and recidivism is just one aspect of a broader process of deradicalisation and rehabilitation (Altier *et al.*, 2019; Marsden, 2015). Second, terrorist recidivism is lower than for other criminals the risk of re-engagement declines with age (Altier *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, when recidivism occurs, attacks of “experienced” terrorists are likely carried out in groups and have a higher number of casualties. In such attacks, mental health issues and unemployment can be influential factors of recidivism (Hacker and PISOIU, 2024) Third, available recidivism data may not reflect current trends, as tracking individuals depends on local intelligence resources (Stern and Porges, 2010). While recidivism rates can offer some insight into changes in detainees' worldviews, they cannot alone gauge the success of deradicalisation programs.

### *Risk assessment tools and protocols*

Terrorism risk assessment tools have two uses: detention of individuals prior to the adjudication; or release from detention after having committed an act of terrorism (Monahan, 2011). Instruments aim to identify how violent extremism offenders' vulnerabilities, motivations, criminogenic needs, and protective factors combine within a given context (Pyszora *et al.*, 2022). In discussing the use of instruments, Copeland and Marsden (2020) emphasise that, although these instruments help to identify and structure relevant information and make assessments as informed as possible, they should not be considered "complete solutions" of risk interpretation.

Structured professional judgement (hereinafter SPJ) tools are the most common risk assessment approach in P/CVE (Copeland and Marsden, 2020). SPJ tools like VERA-2R, ERG 22+, SQAT, IR46, RRAP, TRAP-18, and RADAR are designed to support practitioner in decision making by providing information on assessed factors and indicators. However, it is unclear whether risk assessment tools are suitable instruments for measuring the impact of programmes and whether they find use in programme interventions

The main critique of risk assessment in extremism is its inability to predict future events. As Pyszora *et al.* (2022) state, risk assessment "will not provide a definitive answer as to whether an individual will or will not reoffend" (p. 319). Corner and Taylor (2020) also highlight the poor predictive validity of current tools. To be effective, risk assessment instruments must be based on high-quality evidence, used in appropriate environments, and alongside other tools and approaches. The raised critique raises questions on their suitability.

### *Theory of change*

A Theory of Change (TOC) is a framework that helps organisations design activities to achieve their goals. It begins by defining the desired impact, followed by identifying the changes needed to reach that outcome. Through "back casting" (Holmberg and Robert, 2000), intervention providers can map out a clear pathway of steps to achieve the desired result.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2018) recommends that P/CVE programmes analyse their TOC to understand how interventions lead to the expected outcomes. Gielen and van Leeuwen (2023) note that TOC helps map logical pathways to positive results. Cherney *et al.* (2020) suggest focusing on radicalisation drivers and the push

and pull factors during intervention design. However, there is limited literature on the use of TOC in tertiary prevention programmes, and it is unclear how often practitioners use it to assess impact.

#### *Measuring changes in extreme group membership*

One way to analyse the impact of a programme is to measure the number of engaged and disengaged members prior to and after participation in the programme. In the world's first deradicalisation programme created for young skinheads in Norway, the facilitators took change in membership as an indicator of success (Daughtery, 2019). The facilitators judged the number of individuals as members before the programme and compared it with the number after the programme. The results show that in a three-year period (1996-1999), 78% of participants disengaged and the number decreased from 68 to 15. In the Norwegian case, participants were mainly minors and their parents were involved in the programme activities. Also, the participants' actions were known to the involved counterparts.

A similar approach was used in Denmark, where success was measured by the number of people traveling to Iraq and Syria. While the number decreased, Hassan (2019) argues this could be due to other factors, such as IS territorial losses or reduced propaganda. Disengagement from membership is a key variable in impact assessment, as supported by Cherney and Belton (2019). However, changes in the target group's context should also influence the programme's objectives and measurement methods. Membership change is useful, but not the sole indicator of impact.

#### *Evaluation types*

Evaluations analyse the “bigger picture” and address structural challenges and strategic issues (van de Donk, Uhlmann, and Keijzer, 2020). Monitoring or evaluation can be conducted by an organisation itself following their own principles or guidelines (for instance, Malkki, Prokic and van der Vet, 2023) or by an external evaluator. Literature emphasises 8 types of evaluations for P/CVE interventions. They are structural integrity evaluation, effect evaluation, realist evaluation, pragmatic evaluation, theory-driven evaluation, process

evaluation (Gielen, 2019) as well as mechanism evaluation and economic evaluation (RAN, 2018).

To be able to conduct evaluations, the programme owners should train their personnel accordingly, allocate the necessary resources, and find a place for assessment in the organisation's action plan. For instance, allocate 5-10 percent of the budget on monitoring and evaluation (van Leeuwen, 2023). Despite some exceptions (e.g. van der Heide and Schuurman, 2018; Cherney and Belton, 2021), only a minority of programmes evaluate their impact (e.g. Stern et al., 2022; Beaghley et al., 2017; Feddes and Gallucci 2015).

### 3. Practitioners are not implementing recommendations

A key gap in impact measurement is that practitioners rarely assess the effectiveness of their work. Without thorough evaluation of programmes, methods, and variables, it is difficult to determine their true role in participants' progress. Gøtzsche-Astrup (2018) warns that untested assumptions can unintentionally contribute to further radicalisation. Even well-intentioned interventions risk causing harm. Measuring outcomes is crucial for practitioners, designers, funders, and the public, as it ensures transparency and informs resource allocation, policy creation, and future training. Most importantly, whether the programme is achieving its goals.

Most practitioners do not measure the impact of their work. By 2010, Horgan and Braddock had highlighted that only a few programmes had clear criteria for success (i.e. an objective) and gather data about their progress and evaluate their programme. These tendencies have not improved over time. According to IMPACT Europe (2015), only 12% of 55 deradicalisation or prevention programmes provided either quantitative or qualitative data on their effectiveness. Even when they did evaluate their results, the evaluations were "theoretical" and/or "anecdotal" (Feddes and Gallucci 2015). In 2017, Beaghley *et al.* (2017) found only eight sources where the impact of CVE programming was assessed. As Stern *et al.* (2022) have emphasised: 'though deradicalisation and reintegration programming has expanded over the last two decades, there is still a troubling paucity of work assessing what works and what doesn't' (pp 4-5). Creating a TOC, setting clear objectives and measures to

evaluate the progress, defining “success” and “failure”, and systematically collecting data seldom seems to be part of the intervention’s action plan and day-to-day practice. Ineffective and ill-designed initiatives can be a waste of allocated resources and create counter-productive results by ‘increasing the risk of terrorism by failing to detect high-risk cases’ (Koehler, 2017). Without measuring intervention impact, an intervention can do harm, instead of good.

### *Focus of this study*

Due to public needs (growing need for transparent programmes) and gaps in the literature (not measuring their impact), this study approached practitioners to gain a grounded understanding on how they measure impact of their work and reasons for not doing it. This study researched three questions:

- How do tertiary prevention intervention providers measure the progress or regression of their participants?
- How do tertiary prevention practitioners measure the impact of their programme?
- What is the reasoning for not practising impact assessment?

### **Method and sample group**

The following sections provide an overview of the data gathering method, sample group, and data analysis methods of this study.

### *Data gathering method*

To bridge the discussed gap in literature and emphasise practitioners’ perspectives, this study uses semi-structured interviews as the data gathering method. Conducting interviews is a commonly used method to research current and former extremists and practitioners (like Hwang, 2017; Christensen, 2019), programme overviews (Khalil *et al.*, 2019), and literature analysis (such as El-Said, 2012). Semi-structured interview was chosen as a data collection method for two reasons. First, talking with people working in the field or formers ensures access to the most up-to-date principles and methods. Second, this method

provides a space in which interviewees can take ownership, narrate their own stories, and choose what they would like to share. It enables the participants to discuss topics and questions in detail and helps to overcome the “chasm” of knowledge and awareness separating researchers and the general public from practitioners due to the lack of access (Nilsson, 2018).

### *Sample group overview*

For her PhD thesis, the author conducted 20 interviews: 8 with former extremists and 12 with intervention providers. Data analysis showed that interviews with practitioners reached saturation, so the study focuses on the 12 providers, excluding the former extremists. The practitioners were from Finland, Sweden, Germany, Austria, and the UK, Canada and the US. This study aimed to find interviewees from Europe and North America. Europe is the key region dealing with P/CVE on various levels. Norway, Sweden, and Germany some of the longest practice of designing and facilitating tertiary prevention programmes are in Europe (Daughtery, 2019). Second, the European Union and its member states have created and adopted various legislation and strategies (for instance, Counter-terrorism strategy 2018; European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2022) to support P/CVE. Furthermore, the European Commission set up the Radicalisation Awareness Network (hereinafter RAN) and since June 2024, supports EU Knowledge Hub, an EU-wide umbrella network of practitioners and local actors involved in P/CVE.

Sample group members were also sought from North America. Despite local differences, European and Northern American countries in general follow the same principles, for instance, democratic values and human rights, as well as cooperate on bilateral and multilateral partnerships (for instance, NATO). Furthermore, Northern American countries have such organisations as Life After Hate and Beyond Barriers, which provide tertiary prevention programme interventions. Nevertheless, neither the United States nor Canada have an umbrella organisation like the EU or RAN that would coordinate legislation and practices as well as share expertise internationally. In summary, the involvement of intervention providers from Europe and North America is necessary for this study for two reasons: firstly, to gain insights into the impact measuring practices of intervention providers from those

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regions; secondly, to understand the role of the surrounding environment in impact measuring practices.

The interviews focused on the principles of the work methods used, the practices of tertiary prevention programmes, and respondents' interpretations of the key terminology, such as "success", "failure", "deradicalisation", and "disengagement". The interviews also explored whether and how the impact of the work is assessed. Furthermore, if impact is not assessed, then the rationale behind such an approach is addressed to gain an overview of how exit work is carried out and the different types of cases managed, a similar approach to Savoia *et al.* (2022), Stern *et al.* (2022), and Marsden (2017) has been used. Recruitment of participants included one exclusion criterion: individuals were eligible if they were over the age of 18. The recruitment process included two steps. Firstly, an overview of suitable candidates was created based on RAN's communication and author's network developed by her while writing her MA thesis<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, after conducting the interview, participants were asked to recommend organisations or individuals eligible for this study. This led to snowball sampling. According to the information power framework (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, 2016), fewer participants are needed when the sample holds in-depth knowledge, making the 12 interviews sufficient for this study. Nevertheless, considering very specific target groups, a selection bias (discussed below in more detail) is enrolled in the design of the study, especially due to using snowball sampling (Khalil, 2019). Practitioners were mainly employed by third-sector organisations that are funded on a project basis by public sector organisations, some organisations worked on a voluntary basis.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Methods and topics of conversation supporting the deradicalization and disengagement of Islamists based on practices of six European countries,' University of Tartu, 2019

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religious affiliation</b>	<b>Years as a practitioner</b>	<b>Professional title</b>	<b>Being a former</b>
Male	33 – 40	Atheism	10 years	Exit worker	Yes
Male	47 – 56	Paganism	1 year	Founder / facilitator	Yes
Male	47 – 55	Christianity	4 years	General manager	Yes
Female	26 – 32	None	4 years	Counsellor	No
Male	33 – 40	Agnosticism	10 years	Social worker	No
Male	33 – 40	Atheism	14 years	Case manager	No
Male	47 – 55	Christianity	1 year	Exit worker	No
Male	41 – 46	Spiritual	1 year	Project worker on exit work	Yes
Male	26 – 32	Atheism	4 years	Deputy director of research department	No
Male	33 – 40	Christianity (cultural); Atheism	3 years	Manager	No
Female	47 – 55	None	4 years	Exit worker	No
Male	33 – 40	Islam	3 years	Project manager	No

Table 1. Participants of the sample group

To protect the confidentiality of intervention providers, their demographic data is not linked to the country or the organisation they work at and their interview codes, reducing the risk of identification and potential harm from clients' associates. The principle is the same with participants' sex, age, religious affiliation and other demographic indicators. The data is demonstrated for two reasons. First, the table provides a transparent overview of the participants involved in the study. Second, intervention providers' backgrounds can have an

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effect on the ways how they work. For instance, their religious worldview and identity or experience of being a former can influence how they identify and interpret the key terms of the field such as “extremism” and “radicalisation”. This, in turn, can influence how they understand terms like “success” and “failure” which can have an effect on their impact measuring practices. Whilst this study does not analyse correlations between interviewees’ religious identity and their impact measuring practices, the data about their religious worldview can help to better understand the general trends among intervention providers. Nevertheless, in some cases, a participant's ideology is noted, but the interview code is omitted to prevent recognition, following Nilsson (2018). Additionally, participants were given the chance to review their transcripts before analysis. This approach aligns with ethical guidelines from researchers like Dolnik (2011), Atran et al. (2017), and Sluka (2020).

Participants had the opportunity to choose whether to agree to participation (informed consent form) in written or oral form. The aim of offering two options was to provide support for participation for individuals who wanted to protect their anonymity among the general audience. It was clearly stated in the consent form that they can withdraw from the study at any time without the need to give an explanation on the informed consent form as recommended by Morrison, Silke and McGown (2021). Participants were given the contact information of mental health professionals if they felt distressed after the interview.

Owing to the aforementioned reasons, the recording files of the interviews saved on the author’s computer used neither the name of the participant nor the place or time at which the interview was held. The codes used to refer to interviews were created based on the number of the interview known only to the participant and the author of the study

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed by using Braun and Clarke’s (2013) transcription notation system. Owing to the sensitivity of the topics discussed and the need to protect the confidentiality of the participants, neither transcription software nor additional help was used. Throughout the study, the author kept a reflection diary to contemplate the emotions the researcher went through during the study as well as to analyse how her personal worldview and experiences might influence the way she sees the data received, as suggested by Germain

*et al.* (2016). The diary comprised four parts: interview process, transcribing process, coding, and creating themes, including an overview of merged codes and themes with reasonings. Furthermore, as researchers do not approach topics in a vacuum and might have an agenda in seeking answers (Hamdan, 2009), they must “deconstruct” the impact they have on the research process (Hill and Dao, 2020; Dowling, 2006). Throughout the study, reflexive TA created a need to constantly ask oneself about the ways the research is conducted and why it is done in this way. Certain questions about the process were revisited during each phase of the research and reflected on during the data analysis phase: ‘What questions were asked regarding participants’ demography and why were these exact questions added to the list?; ‘How much did the questions of the interviews change in the process based on the reflection of the conducted interviews?’; or ‘What were the factors that influenced my ability to work on this thesis?’

Due to the lack of suitable theoretical frameworks to address the focus of this study at the beginning of the research process, a combination of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) was chosen as the data analysis method. At the beginning, this study aimed at exploring the perspectives of practitioneres and support better decision-, and policy making by providing an understanding of thinking patterns and choices of practitioners. Instead of creating a theory, the data was formed into themes, following the 6-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2021).

The process was iterative – the interview questions were revisited after each discussion. Transcriptions of interviews were coded twice to adjust the material. During the creation of themes, which was done inductively, and writing the topic summaries, the codes and subthemes were constantly revisited, merged, and renamed. This approach was implemented separately with both original sample groups (practitioners and formers). Therefore, removing former extremists as a sample group did not impact the results of the data analysis of the remaining sample group.

### *Limitations*

There are two main limitations of the chosen methodological approach: sampling locations and use of snowball method.

Whilst the sample involves two major regions of the world, it is dispersed and affects the transferability of findings. Due to different contexts, the results of a similar study design might differ in other regions of the world. Expanding the participant base in size and from different regions in future studies would enhance robustness and provide a more comparable overview.

The second limitation is regarding the use of snowball method. Tripepi *et al.* (2010) argue that ‘a selection bias comes from any error in selecting the thesis participants and/or from factors affecting thesis participation’ (p 95). Sample group members participated in the thesis voluntarily and their time was not compensated in any way. Considering the length of the interview and communication before the discussion, the individuals who ended up participating had the privilege of providing their time for this study. Furthermore, they most likely had a positive connection with academia and/or with the field. Although the number of interviewees is presentable, compensating time spent on the interview might be a necessary practice for future studies to be able to recruit participants who are time-short or not (yet) secure socio-economically. Making participation more accessible would increase diversity of participants and therefore create more robust findings.

### *Ethics*

To conduct interviews for this study, the author received ethical confirmation from the ethics commission of the Royal Holloway, University of London.

### **Results**

The interviews show that nine out of 12 practitioners are supportive towards progress-measuring tools and acknowledge a general need for them. However, only 50% of the interviewed practitioners measure participant progress with standardised tools or set criteria. The following paragraphs describe ways in which the impact is measured by practitioners and reasons why practitioners do not measure the impact of their work.

The current paragraphs provide an overview of tools, methods, and criteria that are used by practitioners. The results are categorised into two: ways participant progress is

measured and how the impact of programme intervention is evaluated. Practices described comprise a systematised overview of the methods described by all interviewees, i.e. a set of practices and principles from various interventions. In practice, whilst there are intervention providers whose impact-measuring practices are well coordinated, there are organisations where multiple layers of analysis can be mixed together or none practised.

### 1. Measuring participant progress

The overview includes three parts: participant progress or regression measuring method pre-intervention, during intervention, and post-intervention. It is important to note that the practices described comprise a systematised overview of the methods described by all interviewees, i.e. a set of practices and principles from various interventions

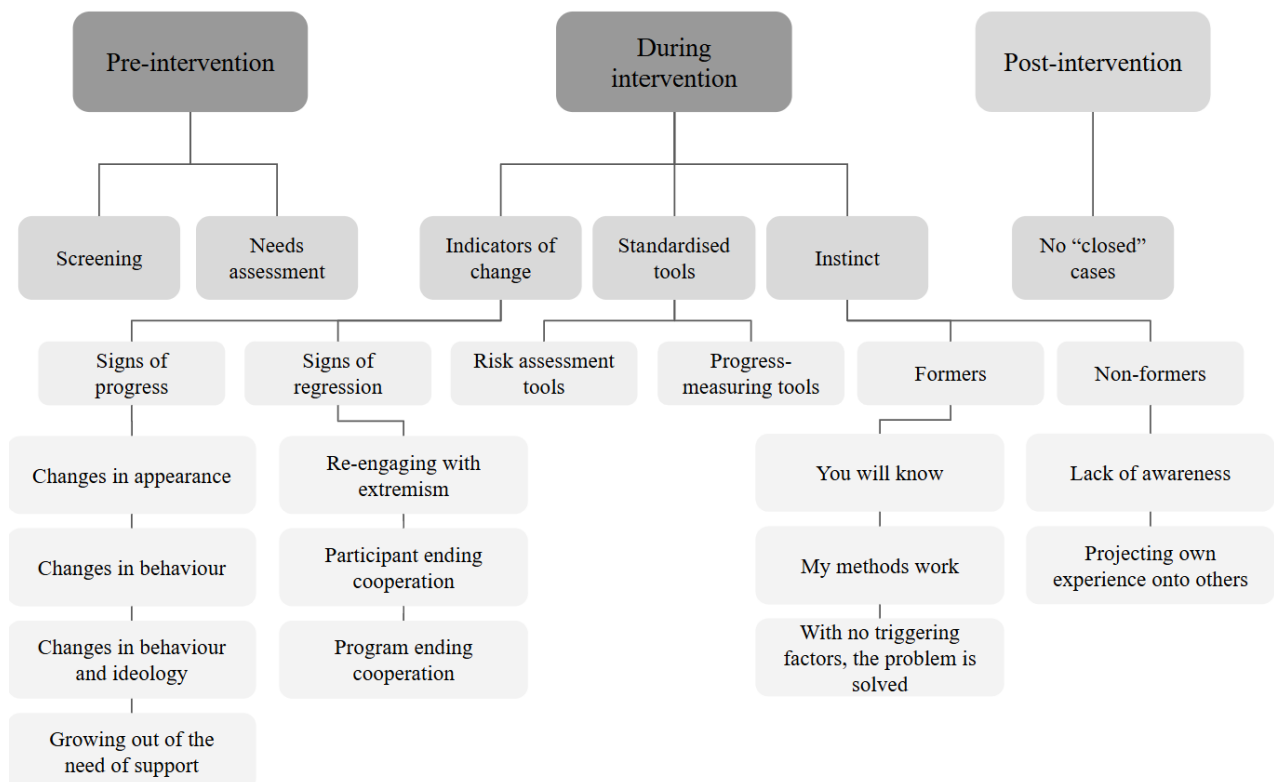


Table 2. Participant progress measuring practices

*Pre-intervention assessment methods*

*Screening*

Screening is a process whereby the worldview and background of the possible client, including criminal activity, are explored and assessed. Screening was practised only by two practitioners from different organisations out of the 12 involved. From the programme intervention's perspective, screening fulfils two aims. It helps to identify whether an individual is a suitable candidate for an intervention. It is also arguably a useful process for identifying individuals who are vulnerable or at-risk of radicalisation or already radicalised and for gaining data about their support needs to design intervention.

One interviewee whose organisation uses screening stated that their approach has three levels: social, biographical, and needs assessment. They state:

‘Based on the results, the links with radicalisation and prevention as well as the core areas of work are identified. The assessment is the foundation for the practitioner to open the discussion with colleagues who have an outsider’s view while you might have tunnel vision.’

(Interview No. 11)

Screening is usually conducted in person on a one-to-one basis with the aim of exploring the participant's worldview and the surrounding factors that affect the individual. In the case of the referral of detainees, practitioners meet with the potential participant or client alongside the agency that approached them. The information gathered and explored during the process includes a variety of topics, starting from the problems and perpetrators the individual is currently facing in life and their motivation to leave extremism to employment status, number of children, and whether there is a need to remove tattoos. Information about behaviour, ideology, vulnerabilities, needs, and the support mechanisms already surrounding the individual helps programme interventions to create a tailor-made intervention for the individual.

### *Needs assessment*

Needs assessment is a process whose results highlight a participant's support needs for leaving extremism and moving on with their life. The main reason for needs assessment is to gain an overview of the participant's life to design interventions based on their need for support. It is practised by all practitioners involved and takes place during the first meetings between the participant and intervention provider(s).

The assessed state of play tends to cover all dimensions of life, including general life management skills on socio-economic, self-organisational, and psycho-social levels (Lautz *et al.*, 2023). Programmes support overcoming all the gaps created by being part of an extremist milieu. As one interviewee phrased:

‘It is not just the ideology they need help with, it is the way back into society. Because a lot of them have burnt all their bridges with friends and family. It isn't just like going back to places; you cannot just rebuild trust.’ (Interview No. 9)

As needs assessment goes along with building personal relationships and trust between counterparts, gaining a thorough overview takes time. Interviewees argued that it might take three to six meetings.

Usually, needs are assessed through conversations that also address topics related to the reasons the individual approached the programme and the kind of help they think they need. As one practitioner describes: ‘Sometimes they tell us very clearly “I want to remove my tattoo” or “I need help with reintegration”, “I need help with finding a job”. [...] Sometimes they just say, “I want to leave”.’ (Interview No. 8) This quote first illustrates the importance of involving the participant in the intervention design. While this needs further research, it is likely that the more a person actively accompanies the process, the greater the help from the approach will be. Second, it highlights the role of trust, acceptance, and honesty between participant and practitioner, the importance of which has been emphasised by Lautz *et al.* (2023). Without them, the results of needs assessments and the objectives set for the intervention might be wrong.

Differences in approaches are based on how structured intervention providers are – whether the approach is carried out only through discussions or whether tools are used to support gaining information about the participant’s needs. Results show that organisations that use tools during needs assessment consider them as resources that assist practitioners in gaining the necessary information. However, if tools do not provide additional support, they perceive no benefit in using them.

### *During intervention assessment methods*

#### *Indicators of change*

Indicators of change have two categories: indicators showing signs of progress and indicators of regression.

#### *Signs of progress*

##### *Changes in appearance*

While changes in appearance (i.e. clothing, footwear, hairstyle, jewellery) do not provide direct information about the effectiveness of the intervention, they indicate that change has taken or is taking place. One interviewee described their perspective accordingly:

‘The presentation of the person is almost like a mirror of their thinking. So, if I wear a t-shirt of a neo-Nazi rock band or tattoos, [and start] to remove these t-shirts and tattoos, this is also a part of leaving. And they are also signs of changing ideology – they lose contact.’

(Interview No. 8)

A changing appearance is an indicator to the individual and others about the shift in reality, i.e. identity: lifestyle changes, the community a person is part of, the ways of seeing the world and interacting with it. Changes in appearance can be witnessed as direct signs of disengaging from the movement and possibly even moving away from identifying with the organisation and their ideology. This process is described by Van de Wetering and Hecker (2023) as an individual disarming themselves from the fight. At the same time, it is important

to notice that a change in a participant's appearance does not directly show disengagement, nor deradicalisation. For that reason, it can be used as a sign of change, but not an independent indicator itself.

### *Changes in behaviour*

Most interviewees claim that changes in participant behaviour indicate progress in the programme.

Lewis *et al.* (2023) emphasised that in some cases, attitudes are tackled implicitly by seeking to address broader issues identified, which are believed to make them receptive to extremist ideology in the first place. This can include individuals' behaviour. An interviewee who works with minors and their families described that progress might come to light in tiny changes within behavioural patterns, which, in the long run, have an enormous effect on the family's wellbeing and relations. They said:

‘A very big example is that children won't lock themselves in their room. [...] Tiny little things start to happen, and families tell us. [They say that] it's more peaceful, we don't fight anymore, or we had this conversation and it went well.’ (Interview No. 10)

They argue that positive developments can only occur if a participant's family, friends, or partners are also involved in the process. The following opinion is suggested by Lautz *et al.* (2023), who posit that the participant changes their behaviour while the involved entities adopt an accepting attitude towards the client as a person.

Involvement in extremism might include segregation from people outside of a specific ideology and/or movement. One condition for moving away from extremism is that the individual perceives a realistic opportunity to exit (Silke *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is probable that positive changes in behaviour increase the likelihood of re-establishing relationships that have ended or stopped during their time in extremism. They can provide individuals with opportunities to leave by supporting them physically, mentally, and morally.

### *Changes in behaviour and ideology*

Radicalisation and engagement are two separate processes that can but do not always take place simultaneously (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017). In cases where an individual is radicalised and has a history of extremist behaviour, the main indicator of progress is a continuing feeling of obligation to act based on their beliefs. Change is witnessed if an individual either does not conduct acts although they feel obliged or does not feel obliged to conduct acts at all.

A shift in behaviour and ideology is usually assessed or witnessed through discussions between the intervention provider and participant. Whilst change in behaviour and ideology can be witnessed in several ways, there is a need for a clear framework on how practitioners should assess this sphere of a participant's life ethically.

### *Growing out of the need for support*

Khalil, Zeuthen, and Marsden (2023) identify five objectives for programmes: reducing ties with extreme networks, enhancing ties with prosocial alternatives, diminishing the salience of violent social identities, questioning beliefs that justify violence, achieving personal needs nonviolently, and improving psychological wellbeing. Practitioners focus more on participants' needs and support. Interventions typically notice reduced need for support when participants report doing well, network partners see progress, and providers no longer perceive a need for support. One practitioner explained that participants often become too busy with positive activities to meet regularly. Organisations consider their work done when participants are stable, independent, and engaged in beneficial activities, allowing them to contact support as needed. Interviewees' practices for ending cooperation are informal and individual.

### *Signs of regression*

#### *Re-engaging with extremism*

All intervention providers interviewed had clients who re-engaged with their movements. They emphasised two reasons people drift back to movements: lack of sufficient support and inability to disengage from previous connections and create new ones.

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Lack of support could mean that support is not there as often or quickly as needed. One practitioner emphasised the importance of meeting clients face-to-face. The literature does not highlight how often practitioners and participant should meet. In contrast, there are suggestions to design the intervention based on individual's needs as much as possible (for example, European Commission, 2022; Zeuthen, 2021).

Analysis of the conducted interviews shows that drifting back may also include moving from one extreme ideology to another. Koehler (2021) argues that there are examples of side-switching" over decades and different ideologies. A practitioner described the tendency accordingly:

‘They just switch from far-right radicalism to far-left radicalism. Those people are definitely not deradicalised. [...] You can be on the right and be conservative and more on the left and be conservative/liberal. Either way is fine. It is when you take the further leap and become an extremist and you are Antifa and try to burn down a federal building or a police station. Or you are back in the movement and now you are dehumanising people. Either way is a bad extreme. And we don't want people to go either.’ (Interview No. 3)

Reengaging with extremism through re-joining a previous organisation, an organisation with the same or a similar ideology or shifting sides from one ideology to another are phenomena that occur in the field. Such tendencies indicate regression because the individual is not deradicalised and/or disengaged.

#### *Participant ending cooperation*

All interviewed practitioners admitted that they have had cases where an individual has terminated cooperation.

Despite organisations' best efforts, some people terminate cooperation and continue their journey in extremism, which may lead to severe or fatal consequences. ‘When the child died or went off to Syria, then you have questions like ‘Could you have done something because it is so heartbreaking for parents?’ And then you try to find someone who is at fault.’

(Interview No. 10) In the quoted example, the participant's family was aware and involved in the intervention. The cooperation did not lead to disengagement from terrorism, but no responsibility was placed on the programme intervention for the consequences.

In general, reasons for terminating cooperation with a programme intervention are individual. In most cases, participants tend to disappear, which leaves programme interventions without information on the reasons the participant chose to leave. While programmes try to stay in contact, it is not possible in all situations. Some individuals fail at living out their new identities in their everyday lives (Van de Wetering and Hecker, 2023). This includes inability to cope with strong emotions such as anger, rage, and hatred. Their aggression hinders their reintegration process, like building non-extremist social orders like family, education, and occupation. Inability to start a new life or cope with it can be a major factor that motivates an individual to terminate cooperation with programme intervention. However, more insight is needed to gain overview of the reasons that lead participants to terminate their participation in programme interventions.

#### *Programme ending cooperation*

Practitioners claim that while moving away from extremism is a process that includes relapse, core motivation to work towards set objectives and communicate with practitioners must come from the participant. In some cases, participants go even further down the extremism "rabbit hole".

'We ended that case because he was involved in weapons and strange stuff and groups. We said that our counselling is ending. And he radicalised more and more and at some point he got in contact with Breivik. He built him a faith group and all that kind of strange stuff.'

(Interview No. 11)

The quoted expert shared that they give participants one year to show their core motivation and gain trust before ending cooperation. This was common practice among other interviewed practitioners.

While there are individuals who are capable of leaving extremism, there are individuals who for different reasons do not do so even with systematic support, i.e. programme interventions. Silke (2011) has suggested that little impact on “hardcore” terrorists is the reason why some programmes only work with “softcore” participants. The interviewed practitioners worked with a variety of extremists and terrorists, including non-violent, violent, and convicted. Considering the tendency to use tailor-made approaches, this study cannot compare the “level” of extremism, the intervention methods used, or their impact. Nevertheless, due to the importance of self-incentive, further research is needed on how to work with “hardcore” participants and support them in initiating and maintaining the motivation to change.

#### *Standardised tools*

Practitioners measure participant progress with risk assessment and progress-measuring tools. Copeland and Marsden (2020) argue that ‘the most common way of measuring changes in the risk posed by violent offenders is to compare risk assessments at two or more points’ (p 7). The results of this study do not support the claim. Only two intervention providers out of 12 used risk assessment tools. The main motivator for using them is to better understand participants and the environments surrounding them.

Half of the practitioners interviewed use progress-measuring tools. They are used in two ways. First, practitioners have embedded existing tools from other fields in their work to measure participant progress. Activities aim to support practitioners in mapping and assessing participants’ support needs, family and other relationship dynamics, and keep a track record of conflicts. This approach can be fragmented; the tools or methods used provide information about a segment of a participant’s development, not about general progress or regression.

Second, interviewees from two organisations had created a progress-measuring tool and one was in the middle of creating one during the time of interviewing. There are two main reasons practitioners decided to create their own tool. First, practitioners need to map, track, and compare participants’ development during intervention. A progress-measuring tool provides them with an opportunity to note down developments in a comparable form that can be presented to the programme’s participants, colleagues and funders. This helps to

understand the development of the participant and provides evidence-based grounds for changing the intervention methods or objectives.

‘We are trying to find a way where these two worlds could meet in the best possible way. In the end, it is not about us, it is about [programme participants]. It is about their process, not us. [...] It is about what they want to achieve and how they can achieve it.’ (Interview No. 17)

With a tool, participant’s development can be tracked, analysed, discussed, and presented. Without it, changes in the intervention methods and whether a participant is moving towards the set objectives, cannot be controlled or analysed.

Practitioners create their own tools due to the lack of suitable options for monitoring participant development. These tools are often based on existing ones but include new sections or elements. One interviewee noted that risk assessment tools only indicate security threats, not support needs or other intervention domains. "Tool-creating" practitioners add questions covering various aspects of intervention work, from mental health and wellbeing to political influences and criminal behaviour.

Emergence of new tools is beneficial for the whole field, including practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers. They can emphasise the gaps in the field and provide learning opportunities to other practitioners and entities. However, it is possible that the tools designed by practitioners are not created correctly and thereby do not meet the necessary objective. To avoid the creation of malfunctioning tools, practitioners should involve experts to help and support them in the creation and testing phases.

### *Instinct*

50% of participants in this study made decisions based on their instinct. The following section explores the reasons, narratives, and rationale behind this choice. Importantly, the results show that the reasons for working based on intuition differ among practitioners who were formers and among those who were not. Therefore, the rationale of the two groups is discussed separately.

Practitioners who have not been extremists highlighted three narratives or understandings that practitioners used in support of working based on instinct.

First, named practitioners tend to agree with the narrative that they will know when the change has taken place.

Intervention providers notice changes in a participant's behaviour or worldview. For example, if participants report doing well and there are no negative reports from police or social media, it indicates progress. Practitioners analyse "weird energy" or dramatic behaviour changes to understand potential relapses. Trust between participants, practitioners, and cooperation partners is crucial. Conversations between practitioners and participants, especially in mentoring approaches, reveal changes. However, informal, unstructured discussions without systematic notes can miss essential information. If the discussions are informal, unstructured and take place on an ad hoc basis, i.e. not leaving systematic notes behind, the data-gathering method is not transparent and the practitioner can miss essential information about the development of their participant.

Second, practitioners believe that their methods work. For instance, an interviewee with more than 10 years of experience in the field explained that while other practitioners in the field use approaches that focus on cognitive changes, their methods are more versatile and thorough. They include approaches for working with emotions, creating experiences with clients, and building relationships. The interviewee explained: 'It is not about working on the ideology but working together to find a way of life that is okay for you [the participant] and me.' (Interview No. 4) Whether intervention succeeds is controlled through discussions with clients.

Third, named practitioners argue that if there are no triggering factors, the problem is solved. This narrative is controlled by two indicators: the presence of radical thought patterns, and the way an individual reacts to triggers and problems. The practitioners argue that if participants do not have radical thinking patterns and they react positively to previous triggers and problems, then the organisation has fulfilled their duty. The presence of thinking patterns is controlled through conversations.

While it is important to address the root causes of radicalisation, participants may also need help in other areas of life to create a new identity. This is why, first, organisations that provide programme interventions have a wide number of methods in use (socio-economic support, psychological therapy, protection against former organisation members). Second, at different stages of the process it is necessary to conduct needs assessment and adjust the intervention accordingly. Due to the aforementioned reasons, this third narrative might be overly simplified and not support all the necessary areas of life.

Practitioners who have been extremists highlighted two narratives or understandings that practitioners used in support of working based on intuition.

The first result is that intervention providers lack of awareness of current standardised tools and the competency to use them that can be caused by several factors. Lack of awareness of current tools and the competency to use them can be caused by several factors. One former who currently works in the field explained it as follows:

‘You put the data in front of them with all the numbers and I am just going to be – oh god! What is this? [...] Most of what I am doing personally is not based on those data types, statistics and things [like that]. I am going more on the things that I know.’

(Interview No. 3)

The quote emphasises that while the practitioner had a lived experience of change, they did not have the knowledge and competency to use tools and conduct data analysis. Furthermore, as the latter is unknown to them, they tend to rely on and transfer their own experience to their work.

Second, intervention providers who were formers and work based on their intuition, tend to project their own experience onto others. One former who tends to use their experience as the cornerstone of their approach described their methods: ‘A lot of my methods are based on my story – what helped me. I just owe a debt to that if you know what I mean.’ (Interview No. 9). Formers are experts of their experiences. Similarly, former extremist Chris Buckley (2024) claims that formers are very qualified to work in P/CVE and they challenge people who tell them that they are not (p 298).

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Despite publications like Tapley and Clubb, 2019; RAN, 2017; Clubb, Scrivens and Islam, 2024), more knowledge is needed about the effectiveness of the use of formers in exit programmes (Morrison *et al.*, 2021). Next to recommendations (Wichmann, 2021) and standards for employing formers in P/CVE (Gordon *et al.*, 2024),

Koehler suggests that (2024), there is a need for fully experimental designs based on randomised control group trials to establish evidence of interventions and the efficiency of the formers conducting them. The results of this study emphasise that the preparation and ongoing training of practitioners depends solely on their organisation. If working based on instinct is accepted in the organisation, formers are likely to implement the practice. As Frenett (2024) and Gordon *et al.*, (2024), this study argues that being a former does not make a person suitable for working as a practitioner per se. Using personal experience as a case study might be a useful learning opportunity. However, it is unevidenced. While formers can contribute as mentors or exit peer specialists, it is necessary to ensure that they have the necessary skills and competencies for the work. Necessary training, work equipment, quality standards, framework, and salary must also be provided.

### **Post-intervention assessment method**

Practitioners keep in touch with their participants after active cooperation has ended. Intervention providers do not have “completed” or “closed” cases. A programme’s workers usually contact their former participants once or twice a year with the objective of asking about their wellbeing, course of life, and support needs. Analysis shows that most participants do not want to be involved or associated with programmes after intervention. However, there are participants who wish to be included. This is mainly motivated by gratitude and a desire to give something back to the organisation and society. Furthermore, such individuals wish to prevent possible harm caused by other extremists.

## 2. Monitoring and evaluating programme interventions

Results emphasise three ways how organisations monitor and evaluate their interventions.

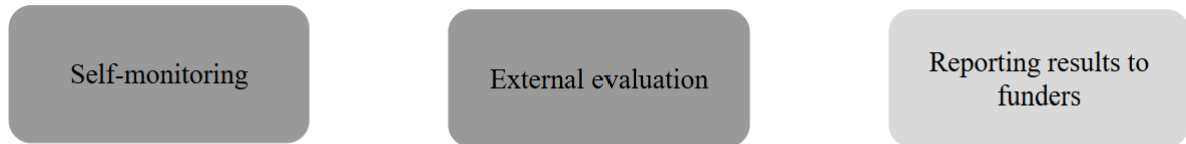


Table 3. Monitoring and evaluating methods

### **Self-monitoring**

Monitoring<sup>4</sup> provides practitioners and other counterparts regular feedback on the consistency or discrepancy between planned and actual activities, programme performance, and results (UNDP, 2021). Despite the need to monitor programmes, only one participant out of 12 practised it in their organisation. Their organisation’s impact evaluation is implemented through supervision - every case is self-evaluated and discussed with a colleague. The practice aims to monitor the cases, receive information about the state of play, and be able to react quickly, if necessary. Discussing every case with two practitioners on a regular basis creates an environment where developments are monitored and “tunnel vision” is avoided. As this approach is implied in all cases, practitioners receive data that can indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches in use, including practitioners’ developmental needs.

### **External evaluation**

There are many benefits of using external evaluators. An evaluation conducted by an outside agency will result in an independent judgement (UNDP 2021) that can help intervention providers and programme owners to identify unrecognised areas of success (Meredith and Örell, 2024).

Despite the advantages, only two out of twelve interviewees had used external evaluators. One evaluator assessed project impacts, while the other provided recommendations based on observations and interviews. However, the latter's report offered little new information, confirming known issues and the challenge of measuring programme

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<sup>4</sup> Can be also deemed “self-evaluation”.

success. The report highlighted indicators for evaluation but did not address how to change current practices. An interviewee noted the evaluator's lack of solutions: "They kind of backed us up and they didn't have a better solution for us." (Interview No. 10) The evaluator confirmed it is currently not possible to evaluate the programme's success.

### **Reporting results to funders**

The majority of programme interventions are funded from public sources and they are obliged to report their results to the funder. Compared to other evaluation ways, the rules are created by the funder, not the practitioner. This article suggests that reporting principles should include several indicators. Contacted individuals and the number of ongoing or finished cases are indicators that could be used in addition to others to gain a better overview of the intervention's impact. Furthermore, funders should be interested in gaining information about the efficacy of working methods (i.e. test whether TOC is suitable), the reasons for changing working methods, and the suitability of indicators of change that are currently taken into account by practitioners.

### 3. Why do practitioners not measure the impact of their work?

Intervention providers are encouraged to assess the impact of their work with standardised tools or other evidence-based practices. While 50% of the involved practitioners do so, the sample group of this study includes people who intentionally do not use standardised methods or agreed criteria to measure the impact of their work on their participants. This study found two reasons that prevent practitioners from measuring the impact of their interventions.

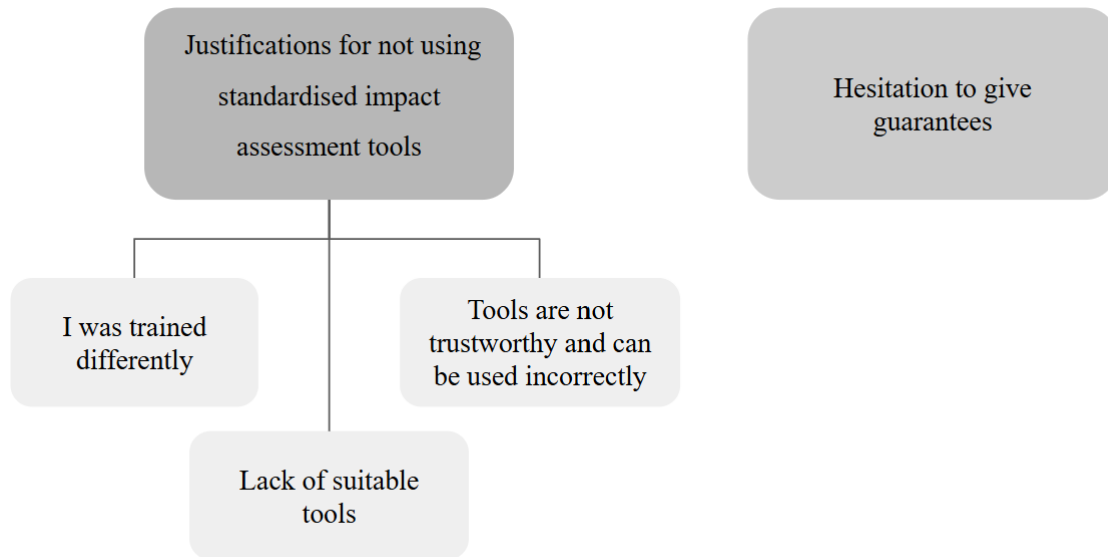


Table 4. Reasons for not measuring impact with standardised tools

**Justifications for not using standardised impact assessment tools**

The results highlight three reasons practitioners do not support the use of impact-measuring tools.

*I was trained differently*

Standardised impact assessment tools or other methods are not used by practitioners because they were trained differently and, therefore, do not see the need to use these tools. For instance, one practitioner, trained as a youth worker, emphasised that they and their clients have a grudge against the paperwork that impact assessment entails. Also, there is a desire to not resemble police, prison, or probation processes, which tend to employ paperwork too often. They claim that ‘social work is not a science with questions and protocols.’ (Interview No. 4) The practitioner’s approach is that they and their client have a goal. Based on the goal they create a plan and ‘we’ll see!’ (Interview No. 4) With the participant, the cited practitioner sets up goals and creates an action plan. Whether they are witnessing progress or regression seems to be assessed based on their instinct. While the practitioner’s intuition might be right, current practice in P/CVE stresses the importance of using standardised methods to measure impact (like Feddes and Gallucci 2015; van de Donk *et al.*, 2020). The practitioner’s training

in youth work can be very useful while working as a practitioner. Nevertheless, using evidence-based and provable methods for demonstrating the development and state of participants benefits the participants, intervention providers, funders, policy-makers and general public.

Reluctance towards anything related to paperwork was also pointed out by another practitioner who has worked in the field for over 10 years. They pointed out that it is difficult to establish a trusting relationship with participants if cooperation starts with paperwork. Whilst their organisation writes down information about practitioners and their progress in forms and questionnaires, instead of having forms “sitting in front” of them and their clients, practitioners tend to fill in the questionnaire after the session in the absence of their client. Furthermore, instead of just one meeting, they gather information throughout several meetings. The organisation argues that this method makes it easier for the participant to start cooperation and establish a relationship of trust.

This problem deepens as all interviewees noted they can choose their own methods based on skills, training, and goals. Approaches may vary within an organisation due to differences in practitioners' skillsets and preferences. Described freedom of choice can lead to situations where impact assessment is either not conducted or done in a non-standardised way, making it difficult to determine if interventions achieve their goals beyond the practitioner's intuition.

*Tools are not trustworthy and can be used incorrectly*

Lack of trust towards tools is especially common towards risk assessment tools. As argued by da Silva (2023), ‘there are several issues [that] remain problematic regarding the study of violent extremism and the implementation of risk assessment tools in this domain’ (p 465).

While being trained in using risk assessment tools, two interviewed practitioners emphasised that the tools accessible for them are either not reliable for implementation or are used incorrectly, affecting the results of the assessment. One interviewee illustrated their position:

‘We are trained in VERA-2 but do not use it. We learnt it because our system uses it and our leaders wanted us to find out what it is about. And it really helps me. Prisons use it. I can see whether they use it correctly or incorrectly. I see it quite a bit now that people use it in the wrong way. And that’s why I think these measurements are so difficult.’ (Interview No. 10)

The practitioner emphasises that the consequences of possible malpractice or misjudgement they have witnessed during prison visits and reading participant’s files might be too significant to take a risk and might complicate the deradicalisation process of their clients, for example, losing earlier release from prison or receiving a longer sentence.

Sometimes, however, they use questions from the tool to be sure about whether they are as thorough in their work as they should be. The practitioner claims the need for tools that are as mistake-free as possible. ‘If something is really waterproof, we would probably use it. But we haven’t found anything like this yet. Maybe something will come up one day. That would make me happy.’ (Interview No. 10) The cited expert does not know how risk assessment is conducted by the police or law enforcement agencies. To the mistakes they have witnessed, the public sector’s lack of transparency in implementing risk assessment results in their decision-making processes could be one reason the expert is so wary towards the use (and possible malpractice) of risk assessment tools.

Considering the cited interviewee’s critique, evidence and the results of Corner and Taylor (2020), the awareness and global use of discussed tools among prison, probation, and police services, especially VERA-2R, is worrisome. Especially in the Australian case where the government was aware of the negative findings, yet the tool was still used in three cases to justify the use of continuing detention orders and extended supervision orders (Bucci and Knaus, 2023). However, in contrast to Corner and Taylor (2020), Duits and Kempes (2023) argue that only six indicators of VERA-2R have low reliability, others are good or excellent. As further research of the exact aspects of risk assessment tools, VERA in particular is needed, this study supports the use of risk assessment tools only if they are suitable, take into account the evidence-based design, testing principles, and surrounding context. It is also necessary to create a loop between adapting the tool to everyday activities, training personnel, being critical towards the use of the tool, and analysing how to develop it.

*Lack of suitable tools*

Half of the interviewed practitioners argue that there are no suitable tools for measuring impact of their interventions. For instance, a well-trained practitioner in psychology said that there are assessment methods for clinical or therapeutic work. However, they are not aware of methods that can be applied to programme interventions. Practitioners claim that currently available tools do not cover the dimensions that show progress or regression related to tertiary prevention.

Practitioners struggle to find suitable tools for tailor-made approaches. The difficulty lies in their uniqueness, meaning that such interventions are designed for specific individuals within unique circumstances. The support one needs and receives to achieve their goals might be very individual, which affects how their progress or regression can be measured. Even if the goals are the same, the circumstances surrounding the participant or their individual capabilities are very influential and make individual cases incomparable. As one practitioner describes,

‘[A tailor-made] intervention might /.../ help somebody get a degree because you can see that the main problem in their life is that they never really found any sort of recognition. Or you help them get a high school diploma while they are in prison. /.../ While you are doing this [the intervention], you continuously re-assess what has changed and what has not.’ (Interview No. 11)

The practitioner tries to structure, visualise, and communicate the changes taking place. However, they admitted that it is a lot of work and it can get convoluted

**Hesitation to give guarantees**

Four practitioners out of twelve pointed out that they hesitate to conduct an impact assessment and share its results with their funder or the general public or even assess impact in general due to being afraid to give guarantees about the results of their work. Their perspective is that if they claim that participants are deradicalised, there is an assumption that they will also stay deradicalised in the future. However, practitioners cannot give guarantees

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on their participants' future beliefs and actions. Since they cannot give guarantees, practitioners prefer to refrain from claiming that their participants are disengaged and/or deradicalised.

The uncertainty accompanying practitioners is described by one accordingly: 'If this person has [been] assessed on whether they have disengaged and deradicalised and then 15 years later they do something, is it, in this case, a relapse? Or is this re-radicalisation?' (Interview No. 17) Interviewees argue that without their former participant approaching them, they do not know how to make sure that their 'alumni' have not relapsed, re-engaged, and/or re-radicalised. Difficulty giving guarantees about someone's progress leaving extremism is especially eminent in a prison setting, where, according to an experienced practitioner, impactful events are simply out of participants' control.

All the interviewees who talked about the difficulty of giving guarantees regarding the long-term outcomes of the intervention agreed that there is a possibility of harmful incidents leading to unwanted actions and consequences. These, in turn, can support re-radicalisation and/or re-engagement. Interviewees are aware of the risk that without systematic support and in the case of a changed environment, the threat of re-engagement after the programme is present.

Practitioners' fear of providing guarantees is justified. When it has become clear that a terrorist act has been carried out by a person who has gone through a programme intervention, such as the Fishmongers Hall attacker (BBC, 2019), the programmes can become subject to criticism, including voices that support ending or changing them (e.g., Bostock, 2019). However, the harsh results of programme relapses can also bring analysing and explaining "voices" to the discussion that explain the purpose of and need for the programme interventions or come to the conclusion that despite efforts, interventions can never be 100% effective.

One factor that supports the hesitation to share negative results of intervention work is that the organisations running these programmes tend to be very dependent on project-based money-flow. As most organisations do not have a sustainable funding mechanism, their subsequent funding might depend on the scores given to their project reports. Knowing this, in turn, puts the organisation in a situation where they would like to show themselves in the

best light instead of being as honest as possible. While projects for programme interventions entail resources for working with participants, it is unclear whether the money received can be used for monitoring and evaluation. For example, only one organisation in the sample group had allocated funding for creating a progress assessment tool as part of their objectives. Furthermore, especially with tailor-made approaches, the resources for conducting monitoring and evaluation might be greater than the recommended 5 – 10% of the budget (van Leeuwen, 2023). Nevertheless, even if time and money are found to carry out the evaluation, participants may still not dare to express their thoughts to funders and other necessary counterparts.

To solve the discussed issues, this study argues that before beginning cooperation, all necessary counterparts should discuss what happens with the funding and future cooperation if participants relapse during or after their time in the programme. For instance, the programmes cannot verify participants' dishonesty or false compliance, nor can they change or influence the external factors that can influence individuals' behaviour and/or beliefs.

#### *Needs for further research*

The following sections include the two most relevant needs for further research to developing the impact assessment practices of tertiary prevention programme interventions based on the results of this study.

First, practitioners have the freedom to choose and adapt intervention methods, but this flexibility makes it hard to control and compare approaches. Tailor-made methods can lead to incomparable cases and unclear responsibilities if a client relapses, needing further discussion in standardised settings.

Second, this study suggests that practitioners who lack suitable tools for impact assessment may benefit from learning more about the existing options. However, as previously stated, practitioners who perceive the lack of suitable tools for tertiary prevention programme interventions should have the opportunity to develop them in collaboration with their partners. This is particularly important for tailor-made approaches where each intervention has its own goals and design, which leads to tailor-made impact assessment

methods and tools. This includes developing standards and tools to measure support needs and decide when to end interventions.

## Conclusion

This article is written based on a thesis that explored intervention providers' attitudes towards impact measuring as a practice, how programme interventions are evaluated, and how participant progress is measured. It also analysed reasons that make practitioners choose not to conduct impact assessment.

The findings showed that despite a positive attitude towards impact measuring, only 50% of interviewed intervention providers measure their participant progress with standardised tools or agreed criteria. The interviewed intervention providers, especially formers working in this role, use their instinct or intuition to "measure" participant progress or regression.

The results also show that programme evaluation is conducted if interventions receive project-based funding and if reporting is part of the donor's requirements. However, performing a self-evaluation or inviting an external evaluator are seldom practised among intervention providers. Interestingly, while academic literature and policy papers emphasise conducting programme evaluation, intervention providers perceive the need to measure the progress of participants instead. Due to the lack of accessible standardised tools, two of the involved organisations have created their own progress-measuring tool, and one was in the midst of doing so during the interviewing phase.

Impact is not measured due to low awareness of the necessity and the tools used, specific reasons for not wanting to use tools in practice, or hesitation to guarantee results due to fear of losing funding or credibility if a participant relapses and re-engages. Furthermore, practitioners perceive that the field currently lacks suitable measuring tools that take into account all dimensions that tertiary prevention programme interventions entail.

This article contributes to research with a unique design and primary data from interviews with intervention providers. In addition to answering its research questions, this timely study contributes to research by highlighting the need for further research, including

tensions between theoretical frameworks or principles, actionable strategies created by researchers and policymakers and practices of intervention providers for overcoming.

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