



POLARIZATION AND INTERVENTION-BASED P/CVE PROGRAMS IN CANADA

Date: November 13, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 13th, 2023, Dr. Sara K. Thompson presented *Polarization and Intervention-based P/CVE Programs in Canada* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The key points discussed were the typology of extremist violence, the processes of radicalization and mobilization to violence, the threat landscape in Canada, past and present (and the impact of social polarization), and the somewhat recent incorporation of prevention/intervention programming into the broader national security apparatus.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Thompson highlighted that the increasingly complex and heterogeneous nature of the current threat landscape poses unique challenges for preventing, disrupting, and responding to violent extremism in Canada. Dr. Thompson presented categories of extremist violence which are diverse and involve individuals and groups located across the political and ideological spectrum. She next discussed the processes of radicalization and mobilization to violence, articulating important caveats about the potential for stigma, false positives and false negatives, and concluded with an overview of the recent incorporation of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) programming to: a) work toward reducing the number of individuals who radicalize and subsequently mobilize to perpetrate extremist violence; and b) help to prevent recidivism on the part of individuals convicted of national security-related offences pending or upon their release from the correctional system.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Thompson began her presentation by introducing the spectrum of diverse ideologies and activities that fall under the umbrella of “extremist types”, stating that extremism includes an array of complex belief systems and behavioral strategies that range from non-violent to pre-violent to extremely violent. She explained that violent extremism is only one variation of extremism—the rarest form—and this is where the use of violence is justified in support of an extremist belief system or ideology. Dr. Thompson presented the categories of extremism that Canadian security agencies have specified and acknowledged, highlighting religiously-motivated violent extremism, politically-motivated violent extremism, and ideologically-motivated violent extremism. Subcategories of the latter include xenophobic (racially-motivated and ethno-national violence), antiauthority (anti-government violence, violence against law enforcement, anarchist violence), gender-driven (violent misogyny, anti-2SLGBTQI+ violence), and other grievance-driven violent extremism.

Dr. Thompson noted that the radicalization-to-violence process is a non-linear one that involves a variety of pathways in which the individual adopts extreme opinions and views that justify the use of violence in support of a particular belief system or ideological orientation. Most people who initiate the radicalization process desist before completing that process—either on their own or with assistance. Further, less than 1% of people who do complete the radicalization process ultimately mobilize to perpetrate extremist violence. What this means is that the overwhelming majority of those who complete the radicalization process do not go on to perpetrate violence in support of an extremist belief system, but rather remain “cognitive radicals”.

This poses obvious and important challenges to accurately differentiating levels of risk; false positives may lead to the infringement of human and Charter rights and exacerbate stigma attached to some segments of the population, while the production of false negatives may serve to increase risks to community safety and national security. Dr. Thompson presented varying risk and protective factors that have been identified in the research literature to be associated with the radicalization to violence process, and behavioural indicators (identified by CSIS) that may suggest that an individual is actively mobilizing to perpetrate an extremist attack.

Increasing levels of polarization in Canada, coupled with the current complex threat environment, prompted a recognition that traditional, reactive, and disruption/enforcement-based approaches cannot, on their own, counter this unprecedented threat. In response, recent years have seen the national security apparatus in Canada (as in other countries) expanded to include a host of prevention/intervention-based programs and activities. Taken together, these approaches fall under the banner of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), a range of programs and initiatives that fall along a continuum, from broad-based prevention strategies to intervention-based approaches, to more remedial disengagement and reintegration programming.

P/CVE programming is modeled on the public health framework and involves programming at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Most currently active P/CVE programming in Canada is of the “secondary prevention” variety and involves identifying a subset of the population who are considered to be at-risk of radicalizing to violence and deploying multi-agency interventions that aim to address root cause issues and reduce the likelihood of a violent outcome. To learn more about operational P/CVE programming in Canada, Dr. Thompson referenced the work of CPN-PREV, who have produced an interactive map that offers a comprehensive and regularly updated list of P/CVE programming and service providers in Canada (<https://cpnprev.ca/the-interactive-map/>).

Dr. Thompson concluded by pointing out that the response to individuals who have initiated or completed the radicalization process in Canada depends on *where* in that process a given individual is located, and introduced three segmented phases, two of which involve and invoke P/CVE programming:

- **Pre-criminal:** This involves early to mid-stage radicalization to violence, before any related criminality has taken place and involves prevention/intervention support programming (i.e. secondary-level P/CVE programming);
- **Criminal:** Comprises mobilization toward and/or the actual perpetration of violence; the criminal threshold has been breached and the appropriate response is disruption/enforcement;
- **Post-criminal:** Involves individuals who have been convicted of extremism-related offences (or, in some cases, have returned from conflict zones overseas) and involves disengagement/reintegration support (i.e. tertiary-level P/CVE programming).

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- There is a spectrum of diverse ideologies and activities that fall under the umbrella of violent extremism.
- The radicalization to violence process is a non-linear process that involves a variety of pathways where the individual adopts extreme opinions and views that justify the use of violence in support of a particular belief system of ideological orientation. Further, most people who initiate this process desist, on their own or with assistance.
- There is no profile for a person that is more susceptible to committing extremist violence, and it is rare; estimates suggest that 1% of people who complete the radicalization to violence process ultimately mobilize to perpetrate extremist violence, which complicates efforts to accurately differentiate levels of risk.
- Responding to radical violence depends on where in the radicalization process the individual is located.
- P/CVE programming is modelled on the public health framework and has three operational levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

FURTHER READING

Sara K. Thompson, Michele Grossman & Paul Thomas. (2023). “Needs, Rights and Systems: Increasing Canadian Intimate Bystander Reporting on Radicalizing to Violence.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*. DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2023.2188964.

Thompson, Sara K. (2023). Policing Violent Extremism in Canada and the United States. In H. Pontell (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.ORE_CRI-00756

Thompson, Sara K. (2023). “Polarization, Violent Extremism and Resilience-led Responses in Canada.” In McNeil-Willson, R. and Triandafyllidou, A. (Eds.) *Handbook on Violent Extremism and Resilience*. London: Routledge.



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