



Evidence Briefing

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Youth Extremisms Countering extremisms: Policy and Practice

In the week it was reported that Salman Abedi (perpetrator of the MEN Arena bombing on 22 May 2017) had been on the radar of intelligence agencies prior to the attack, the final of our six seminars brought academics, policy makers and practitioners to Manchester to share their knowledge and experience of countering violent extremism. Presentations considered the key factors associated with violent extremism such as mental health issues and socio-economic inequality and how interventions in these areas might help counter extremism. Participants from national and regional government and counter-terrorism agencies introduced discussion of the current state of threat from violent extremism and critical appraisal of how policy is working, and not working, to tackle it. Both academic and practitioner participants shared their experience of conducting and evaluating counter-extremism interventions in the spheres of education, prisons and working with 'formers' and families of violent extremists. Finally the role of creative and dialogic means of holding difficult conversations in countering extremism was discussed drawing on first-hand experience of community practitioners and film makers.

Key Discussion Points

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- Radicalisation research seeks to explain *why* and *how* people become extremists using 'pathway' models that try to understand what shifts people from 'thinking' to 'doing' or 'factor' models that identify the range of factors that might make someone more likely to embark on that path. However, no model can be applied to all types of extremism and while many factors are identified as relevant there is usually only a weak link with any one of them. They are thus difficult to apply in practice.
- Root causes of violent extremism are often mediated and articulated as 'grievance' by individuals but grievances are subjective perceptions of inequality and injustice and may, or may not, be underpinned by objectively measured inequality. Grievances also vary greatly in nature. They can be socio-economic (not having food and housing) or ideological/political (resentment at foreign policy, discrimination or injustice towards groups). They can be based in your own experience of deprivation or injustice or they can be felt on behalf of others.
- Extremist organisations of both Islamist and extreme right orientations are increasingly moving away from illegal and overtly extremist narratives in their recruitment and messaging towards politico-social grievances. These have been shown to most closely resonate with their respective target populations and be most effective in gaining sympathy for their organisations.
- This suggests the importance of not ignoring the role of the state in shaping the extremism we seek to tackle and of developing solutions that are not co-opted by the state and its security agenda.
- A significant proportion of referrals to Prevent (the UK counter-extremism early-warning intervention service) have complex needs, which can include poor mental health and multiple disadvantage, although it has not been established how or whether these have a causal link with vulnerability to extremism.
- Whether schools and colleges are an appropriate place for counter-extremism work is an issue of ongoing debate. Children and (especially vulnerable) young people are a conscious target of terrorist organisations and teachers are a crucial partner in front-line safe-guarding. However, research in schools and colleges suggests that both teachers and pupils are concerned that 'safeguarding' can suppress open discussion about radicalisation and extremism (for fear that saying something inappropriate will lead to sanctions) and thus prove counter-productive.
- Interventions that start not with 'counter-narratives' but with open discussion, with clear rules of mutual respect and about topics that matter to the individuals engaged, can be highly effective in a range of places from prisons to schools.
- 'Formers' are often involved (directly or via film) in interventions as a way to open up such conversations. Their role – and designation as 'formers' rather than, for example, as terrorists or criminals – remains contentious, however, and it is not always the case that formers are more authentic or credible.
- Creative – drama, visual arts, music and spoken-word – interventions can be highly effective at opening up space to hold difficult conversations. However, we should be wary of assuming that we need 'safe spaces' to conduct these interventions; to break out of the mould, you sometimes need to hold difficult conversations in *difficult* spaces.
- Throughout much of the discussion it appeared that perceptions act as a constraint while dialogue works to liberate. This led participants to ask whether dialogue is intrinsically productive and suggest dialogue should be used not only to compare, and challenge, perceptions but also to bring perceptions into tension with realities (e.g. Real geopolitical situations). This might ensure the dialogue approach did not amplify the echo chambers already existing in social media.

Implications for Policy

- There are no straightforward solutions to tackling the intersection of mental health problems and violent extremism. Complex needs, including poor mental health, are encountered widely in Prevent and (as yet unpublished and thus provisional) data analysis suggests that some presenting problems are more prevalent in some extremist groups than others. However, the practice of mental health authorities working in conjunction with counter-terrorism agencies in regional hubs has shown positive results.
- Grievances often become a 'hook' for multiple, complex problems in the context of perceived low support. Increasing support (mental health, housing, everyday living), in some cases, can unhook those issues from the perceived grievance, reducing or eliminating the need for specific counter-extremism intervention.
- It is crucial for practitioners to know what is proving effective, including the success or otherwise of counter-extremism (UK Channel) interventions. The peer review (scrutiny) of the process of referral of individuals to counter-extremism interventions and support is crucial to identifying best practice and improving training and awareness around critical moments and issues (e.g. the transitioning of individuals between schools, housing, from child to adult support agencies etc). The publication of evaluations of such interventions would be helpful to practitioners in the field.
- Evidence of the internationalization of extremism, both Islamist and nationalist/extreme right movements (Polish nationalist extremism in the UK is one example) suggests the importance of transnational sharing of experience in devising effective responses to different types of radicalisation.
- Data governance issues can hinder the sharing of crucial information in a timely fashion.
- Notwithstanding the concerns around 'dialogue' as a panacea, dialogue is a crucial way to generate contact with young people who must be seen as the solution rather than the source of the 'problem'.

About the Project

Youth Extremisms: Understanding across Ideological and Religious Contexts seminars are funded under the ESRC Research Seminar Series (Grant Reference: ES/N008812/1). The seminar series runs January 2016-December 2017 and consists of six thematically focused one-day seminars on issues concerning youth engagement in radicalism and extremism across ideological and religious contexts. The seminars bring together academic researchers, civil society actors, policy-makers, government and community actors from across Europe and North America and facilitate constructive dialogue on some of the most serious challenges facing society today.

The seminar series is co-organised by Hilary Pilkington (hilary.pilkington@manchester.ac.uk), Cynthia Miller Idriss (cynthia@american.edu), Graham Macklin (g.d.macklin@c-rex.uio.no) and Fabian Virchow (fabian.virchow@hs-duesseldorf.de).

Further information can be found at:

<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/sociology/research/projects/youth-extremisms/>.

Registration for future seminar events can be obtained from the Seminar Series administrator, Stephanie Rinaldi (Stephanie.Rinaldi@manchester.ac.uk).

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