

The Risk Assessment of Violent Extremism: Challenges, Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Christopher Dean

Senior Fellow: Global Center on Cooperative Security

Registered and Chartered Forensic Psychologist



Building stronger partnerships
for a more secure world

Overview

1. The Nature of Violent Extremism
2. Key Challenges
3. Assessing Risk of What
4. Risk Dimensions
5. Assessment Examples
6. Lessons Learned
7. Future Directions
8. Parting Reflections

The Nature of Violent Extremism

Violent Extremism

"Acts of violence committed on behalf of a group, cause or ideology to bring about political or social change".

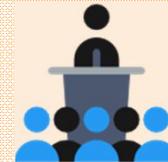
Typically intended to facilitate changes in how society or parts of society function



Provokes fear and terror in order to force such changes to occur



Influences and affects those who are not the immediate victims of harm, such as the wider public and ruling authorities



Affects a particular group of people (a defined out-group)



Serves the specific goals and objectives of a particular group, cause or ideology



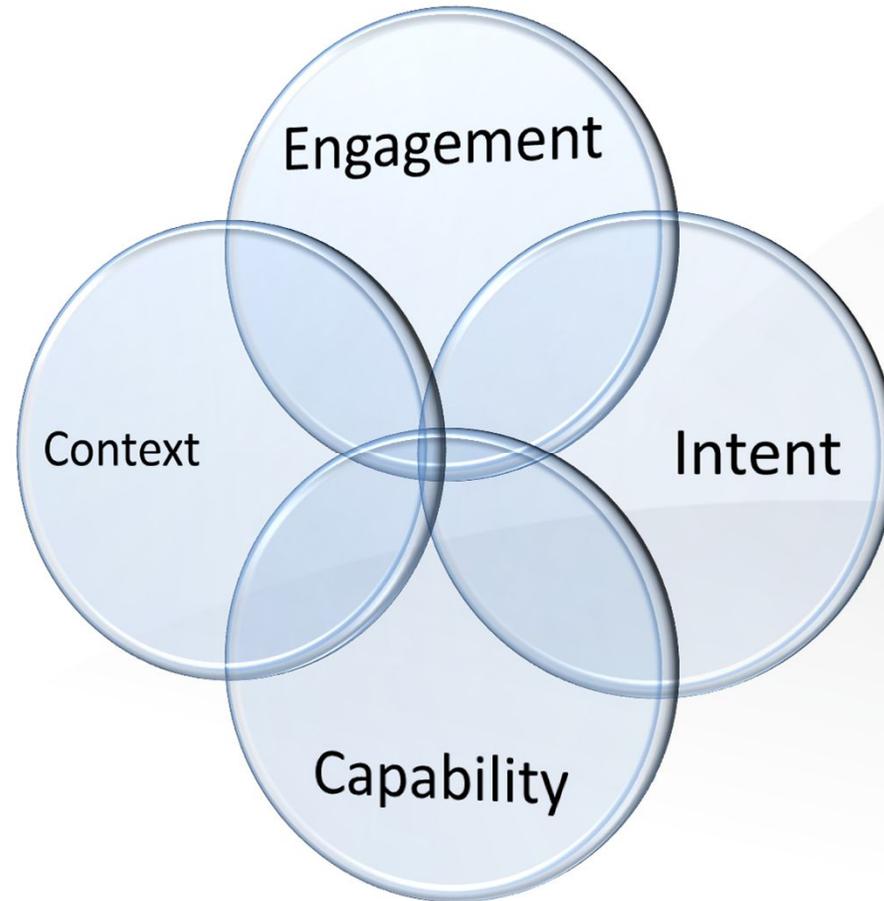
Key Challenges

- Identifying what we are actually assessing
- Types of offences are varied & diverse as are roles in offending
- Small number of offenders & low base-rate of offending (lack of data)
- Lack of specificity (incorrectly identifying those considered 'at risk')
- Arrest before commission of harm
- The complexity of group dynamics
- Information can be limited or restricted
- Danger of pathologising behaviours
- Vulnerable to bias and over-estimation of risk
- Identifying those who will move from involvement to offending

Assessing Risk of What?

- Reoffending (same/similar offence)
- Reoffending (more serious offence)
- Committing an act of violent extremism (no previous history)
- Interest or involvement in violent extremist groups, causes or ideologies
- Vulnerability/resilience to radicalization
- Radicalizing Others
- Recruiting Others
- Committing acts of violent extremism in custody
- Prison/family/staff member

Risk Dimensions



Understanding Risk Dimensions

Engagement

The factors or circumstances that lead individuals to become interested in and involved with extremist groups, causes and ideologies, which can also motivate extremist offending.

Intent

The factors or circumstances that can make individuals prepared or willing to support or cause harm against others on-behalf of an extremist group, cause or ideology.

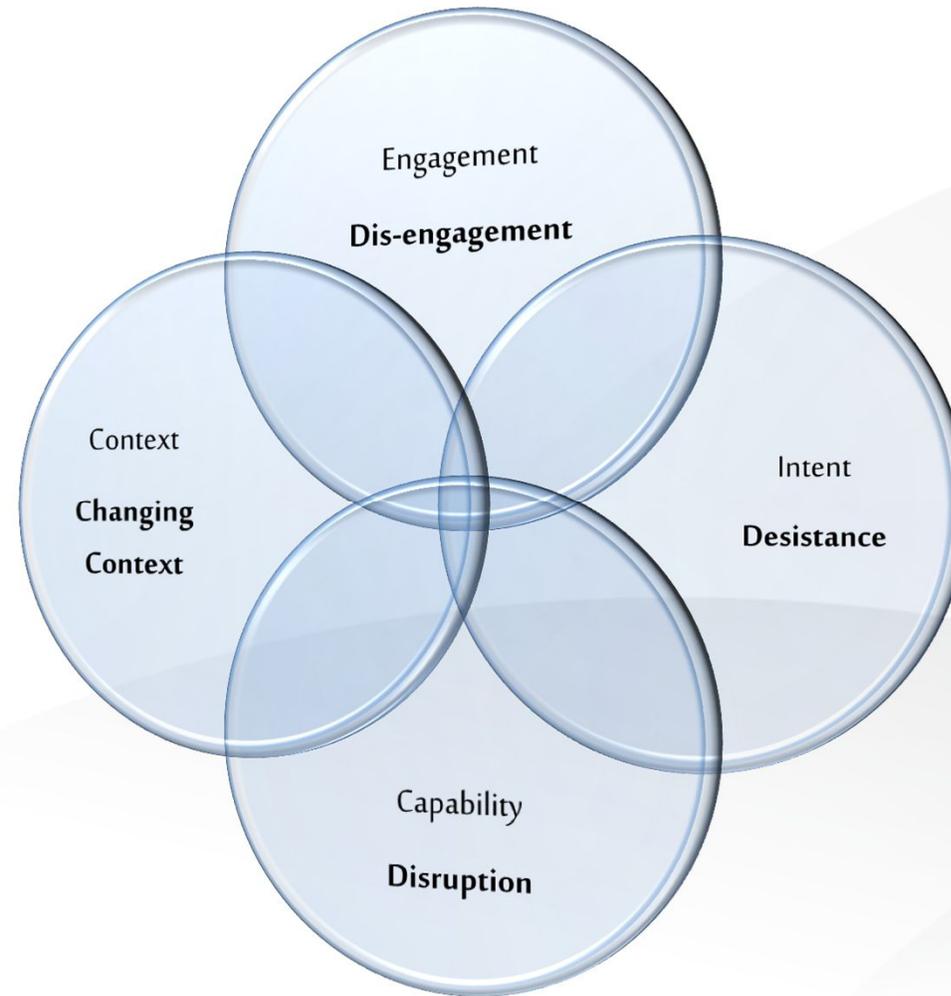
Capability

The skills, knowledge, connections (etc) that can be employed to successfully commit an extremist offence.

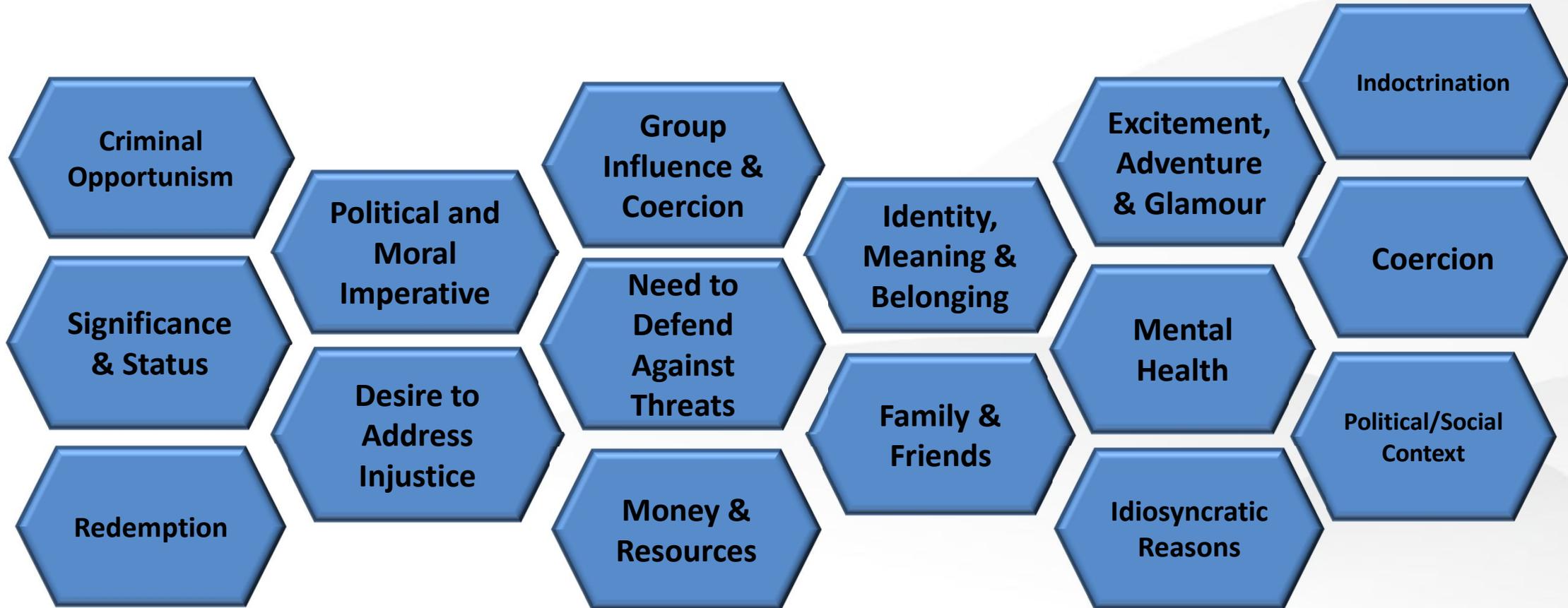
Context

The specific local, national and global cultural, political, social (etc) climate or circumstances which may impact on engagement, intent and capability

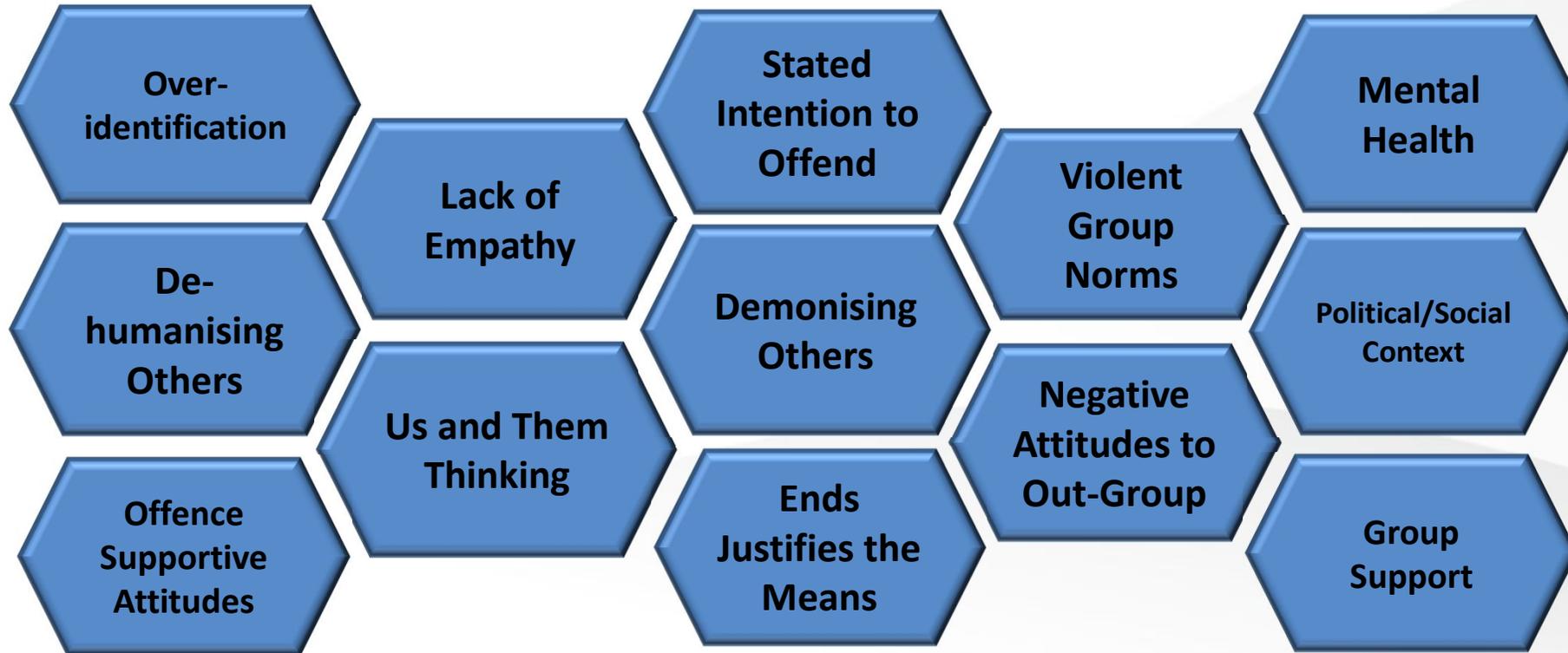
Understanding Risk Dimensions



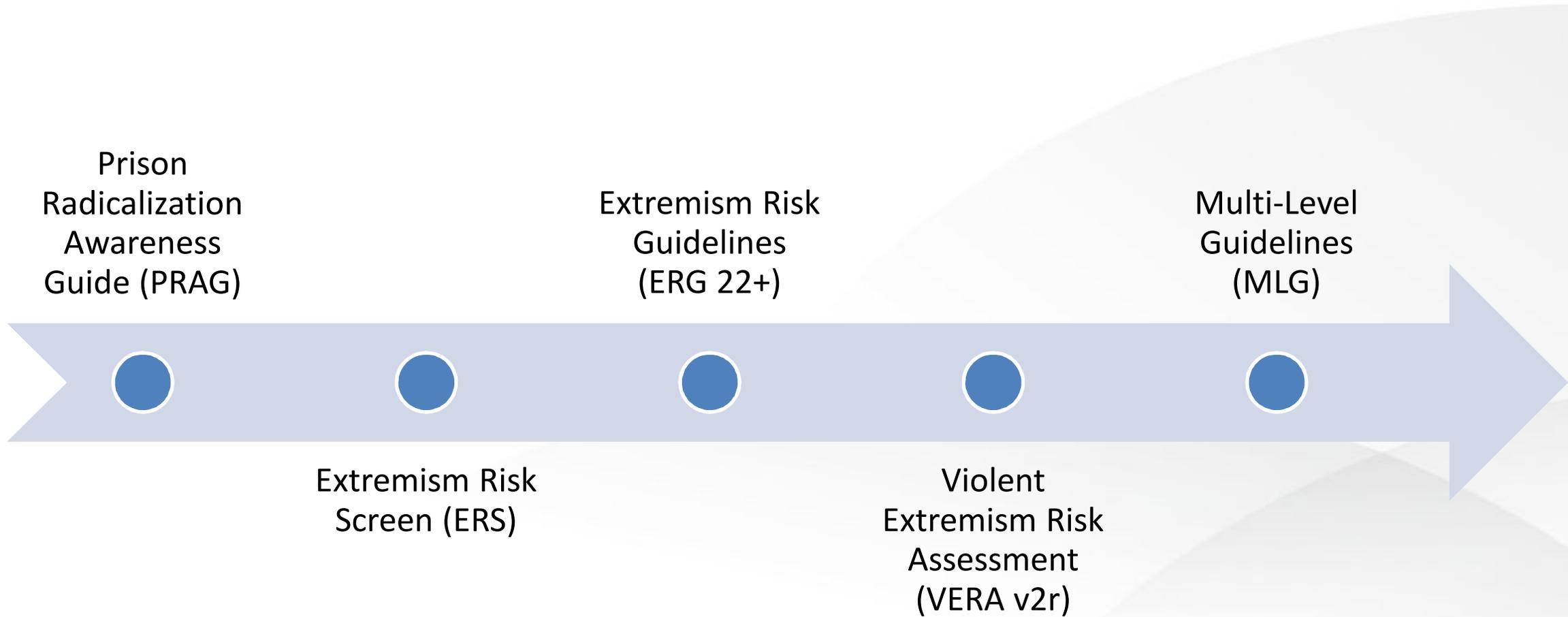
Reasons for Engagement



Preparedness to Offend



Assessment Examples



Lessons Learned

- Balancing 'what works' with innovation
- The importance of context and circumstance on behaviour
- Different assessments/protocols for different circumstances
- Assessment to inform management actions
- Accommodating change (including disengagement) into assessment
- Assessment doesn't exist in a vacuum (perception of the enemy)
- Striking a balance between validity and utility
- Ethical & political sensitivities (pre-offending, political agendas)
- Protective factors or offence paralleling behaviours?
- Consistency in approach across assessment types

Future Directions

- Establishing pathways
- Establishing validity, utility and reliability (if realistic)
- Improving specificity and sensitivity (esp for screening)
- Developing assessments responsive to correctional cultures
- Accommodating differences (e.g. gender, age, role, lone actors)
- Assessments of disengagement and desistance

Parting Reflections

- How can we improve how we evaluate the potential role of context and circumstance in risk assessments?
- How can we be more considerate of how the process of assessment can impact on perceptions, engagement and intervention?
- To what extent should emphasis be placed on seeking to assess disengagement and desistance rather than past/current risk factors and circumstances?
- Should assessment in criminal justice contexts be used more widely to prevent (or pre-empt) of other forms of harm or offending?

Selected References

- Lloyd, M., and Dean, C. (2015). The development of structured guidelines for assessing risk in extremist offenders. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management: Vol. 2 (1)*. 40-52.
- Pressman, D.E., and Flockton, J. (2012). Calibrating risk for violent political extremists and terrorists: the VERA 2 structured assessment, *The British Journal of Forensic Practice: Vol.14(4)* 237-251
- Monahan, J. (2012). The Individual Risk Assessment of Terrorism. *Psychology, Public Policy and Law: Vol. 18 (2)*, 167-205.
- Borum, R. (2015). Assessing Risk for Terrorism Involvement, *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, Vol.2 (2)*, 63-87.
- Sarma, K.M. (2017). Risk Assessment and the Prevention of Radicalization from Nonviolence into Terrorism, *American Psychologist, Vol.72 (3)*, 278-288.

Contact

Email: cdean@globalcenter.org

Websites: www.globalcenter.org
Identifypsychologicalservices.com