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Evaluability Assessment and Formative Review of the Community Resilience Exercises (CREX): Summary Overview

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1. Background

Each year the United States devotes more resources and attention to the threat of violent extremism, and it is becoming more and more apparent that "we cannot arrest our way out of this problem" (Vidino, 2015). In many instances, increasing reliance on punitive deterrence and further securitizing the response to this phenomenon have only exacerbated the issue and strained relationships between the police and the communities they serve. Communities and law enforcement often must contend with enabling factors that drive individuals toward violent extremism, including perceived injustice and messaging that legitimizes extremist views. Ongoing efforts to identify and detain terrorists appear to be treating symptoms rather than causes. As a result, countering violent extremism (CVE) experts are placing a greater emphasis on combating causes of violent extremism through community-based programming (Ellis et al., 2011). One reason communities have been unable to effectively combat increasing extremism could be that terrorism is not a daily concern for most Americans; therefore, there is a lack of understanding surrounding the realities of the threats of violent extremism to American communities including signs of radicalization, groups active in local regions, warning signs of impending violence, and most importantly what services are available to support communities facing these threats.

To address the perceived lack of information available and coordination within communities, the CREX was created to bring together members of the community, law enforcement, and government officials to learn more about threats facing local communities and resources available to mitigate these threats. The program was originally developed as a follow-up to the Community Action Briefings (CAB) delivered to communities through the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC). The CAB is a declassified security briefing tailored to local communities and designed to increase awareness of incidents of violent extremist threats in the region. In response to information presented through the CAB, stakeholders began to request additional programming and training to better identify and address these threats proactively. One limitation of the CAB is that it was not designed to deliver solutions to the problems it identified. It became clear to DHS that a supplement to the CAB was needed; one that could leverage the community's newfound awareness and equip them with the resources and local connections to mitigate early-stage threats of radicalization and violence.

While searching for a solution, staff from DHS and NCTC learned of a program in the United Kingdom called Project Nichole, being carried out through the UK's Home Office, designed to educate and equip communities with the knowledge and resources to effectively identify

individuals vulnerable to radicalization into violent extremism and to direct them to local interventions. The initial CREX was developed based on observation and adaptation of Project Nichole and had three primary goals: (1) to educate communities on the existence of and need to counter the threat of violent extremism in their communities, (2) to help communities identify and recognize the available resources locally that may help to divert an at-risk individual before "crossing the line of criminality," and (3) to lay the foundation for the development of a community action plan to mobilize when such threats arise. The CREX was piloted in Washington. Subsequent CREX have been delivered in communities across the United States. The CREX, similar to other small government programs, has not undergone formal evaluation efforts. This effort was designed to provide an evaluation of the recently redesigned CREX program and to develop a model for assessing how similar small programs can best leverage resources to integrate evaluation into program design and ongoing improvement.

2. Importance of Program Evaluation

Although more attention is being placed on community-level programming, the effectiveness of efforts to preemptively counter the threat of violent extremism in local communities remains unknown, and little research has been done to evaluate the efficacy of CVE programming (Freese, 2014). Recently, the RAND Corporation (Beaghley et al., 2017) identified only eight program evaluations that specifically link interventions to outcomes (Aldrich, 2014; Amjad & Wood, 2009; Feddes, Mann, & Doosje, 2015; Frenett & Dow, 2017; Liht & Savage, 2013; Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2016; U.S. Agency for International Development, 2011, 2013). The lack of formal evaluations has not stopped programmers from deeming their programs as successful; however, these "claims of success associated with several programs have not been validated or supported" (Horgan & Braddock, 2015, p. 156). The lack of CVE program evaluations is so dire, one review found in 2009 that only 7 of 20,000 terrorism studies contained moderately rigorous evaluations of counterterrorism programs (Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2008). These findings led the authors to conclude that "despite the efforts of some researchers to push empirical work forward, the general state of terrorism research lacks an empirical evidence base" (Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2008, p. 2).

Evaluative work in the CVE arena is inherently difficult and has not necessarily been avoided for lack of researcher interest. A review of the literature identifies several primary challenges for those designing CVE evaluations including:

- the difficulty of measuring the non-occurrence of an event,
- a lack of a clear and common CVE terminology,
- the difficulty of operationalizing CVE evaluations in general,
- the fact that CVE programs are not often not designed with evaluation in mind,
- identifying the outcome variable,
- availability of data to analyze,
- securing stakeholder buy-in, and
- limited resources.

A longstanding challenge in assessing terrorism-related research and programming is that success is, by definition, a nonevent (i.e., the non-occurrence of a terrorist attack). Fink, Romaniuk, and Barakat (2013, p. 2) refer to this dilemma as "measuring the negative." Measuring the negative is extremely difficult, and researchers and practitioners are acutely aware of this challenge. Similarly, the outcome of interest—a terrorist event—is rare, creating a lack of data from which to identify trends among the acts themselves and the perpetrators. This creates a difficulty in "drawing a line of causality between the desired outcomes that we observe (nonradicalization or nonviolence) and a specific Prevention [sic] initiative" (Romaniuk & Fink, 2012, p. 10). Adding to the complexity is the fact that even the most comprehensive programs are unlikely to be a complete success (Vidino, 2010). If perfection is unlikely, the question then becomes what thresholds for success should exist? For instance, "if one hundred individuals go through a deradicalization program and only a handful of them revert to terrorism, how is the program to be assessed?" (Vidino, 2010, p. 10).

CVE research also suffers from a lack of common understanding of its aims, methods of achieving its goals, and uniform terminology, including definitions that are frequently unclear, misleading, or even inappropriate (Silke, 2001; Thomas, 2010). According to McCants & Watts (2012, p. 1), at its most basic level, "there is not a shared view of what CVE is or how it should be done… The lack of a clear definition for CVE not only leads to conflicting and counterproductive programs but also makes it hard to evaluate the CVE agenda as a whole and determine whether it is worthwhile to continue." For example, in a process evaluation of CVE programs in the UK, practitioners working under the same policy guidance (and even within the same programs) had differing definitions of extremism, making recommendations difficult to standardize or compare between the programs (Hirschfield et al., 2012).

Another challenge in conducting CVE evaluations is that evaluation at the program level is difficult, given the variety of programs, their aims, funding sources, and stakeholders. Participants at a 2013 CVE symposium in Ottawa noted numerous operational challenges—many of which were echoed by participants at the 5RD Workshop to Counter Violent Extremism—including the limited availability (and interest) of expert evaluators suited to conduct evaluations of CVE programs; obtaining funding to conduct the evaluations without diverting investment from core programming; working between sometimes contentious relationships between governments, practitioners, and evaluators; and ensuring receptivity to results and securing the political will to learn from evaluations (Fink, Romaniuk, & Barakat, 2013). Additional challenges at the program level range from conceptual, such as elaborating a theory of change, to practical, including the identification of the objectives and scope of the evaluation, metrics selection, and identification of an evaluator (Romaniuk, 2015).

More recently, Mastroe and Szmania (2016) identified five additional challenges in designing an evaluation for CVE programs which include identifying the outcome variable, availability of data to analyze, identifying the timeframe of the analysis, and providing a cross-case comparison of evaluation results. Identifying the outcome variable is perhaps the most enigmatic and difficult to define of these challenges. Mastroe and Szmania (2016, p. 51) argue that "the ideal outcome variable requires proof of a counter-factual, such as observing the individuals that did not radicalize…would have radicalized otherwise [without the intervention]," an observation that is difficult to properly validate. Accordingly, program designers and evaluators must identify proxy variables to show the given intervention or treatment has resulted in a positive outcome which either increases resilience to violent extremism or decreases involvement in extremist or violent ideologies.

Because so few CVE program evaluations have been conducted, many have voiced a valid concern over whether CVE programs are designed to meet their intended goals. Some researchers go so far as to suggest a "disjuncture between the largely ideological focus of current deradicalization programs and the factors found to motivate individuals' entry into and exit from terrorist organizations" (Morris et al., 2010, p. 2). In other words, instead of designing programs with specific outcomes as the goal (e.g., better educational outcomes, increased job prospects, involvement in pro-social activities such as sports), programs are developed at a very high level with broad, unrealistic objectives aimed at general ideologies instead of actions (e.g., to decrease Islamic radical violence). These designs contribute to "the disappointing state of [terrorism research]," which primarily consists of "wild speculations without foundation" (Sageman, 2013; in Freese, 2014, p. 40).

Without empirical evidence, it may become difficult to support the continued funding of CVE programs (Mastro & Szmania, 2016). Allowing the CVE knowledge base to languish at this level of ignorance is of grave concern given the serious nature of the subject and the potential for high human and economic costs if the programs are not effective (Silke, 2001). In an effort to address this critique, the President's 2016 strategic implementation plan for CVE, calls for "rigorous, evidence-based research to understand and counter the violent extremist threat" (Executive Office of the President, 2016, p. 4) and to "routinely evaluate the effectiveness of CVE programs and activities to ensure that the Department's resources are invested appropriately" (p. 14).

Despite these challenges in evaluating CVE programs, it is imperative to discern which interventions and related efforts are the most effective, under what conditions, and for which contexts. The reasons for this range from practical to moral. Funding agencies need to have confidence that the programs they support are actively achieving their stated goals using robust and proven methods with empirical support in both the literature and practice. Moreover, in keeping with "do no harm" principles underlying all CVE interventions, the intended impacts and unintended consequences affecting communities exposed to them must be fully understood and defensible as not exacerbating the problem further.

3. Methodology

To accomplish the previously stated goals of conducting an evaluability assessment and formative review of the CREX, data collection for the evaluation consisted of three unique sources of data and corresponding analytical techniques.

3.1 Qualitative Review of Historical Documentation

Initial requests for documentation were made prior to the initiation of a program redesign. The original documents that were provided included boilerplate text used to introduce the CREX to potential communities, government reports citing the use of the CREX within the larger CVE engagement context, example scenarios used in previous CREX sessions, and stakeholder evaluation forms from select sessions. These documents were analyzed to identify program activities and goals as stated in descriptive text about the CREX. In addition, the stakeholder evaluation forms were reviewed for statements regarding the most and least informative aspects of the CREX events, and general stakeholder satisfaction and recommendations for improvement.

3.2 Stakeholder Interviews

To better understand the history and goals of the original CREX design, we conducted interviews with the original developers and champions of the CREX at DHS. In addition, we interviewed staff who were involved with the delivery and facilitation of the pilot implementation and other CREX sessions using the original design. Interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview protocol with a core set of questions that was supplemented with additional questions based on the topical expertise of the interviewee. Stakeholders and participants were from previous events were also interviewed. Participants provided their recollection of the CREX event, scenarios, activities, stakeholder mix, and post-event impressions and activities. In addition, participants were asked to provide overall evaluations of the utility of the CREX event (to allow for a longer-term assessment than the post-evaluation forms completed immediately after the session) and to make recommendations for improvements based on their experience.

3.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

During interviews with program designers, organizers, and past participants, the research team recorded audio and took notes of each interview. Afterward, the recordings and notes were combined to create transcripts of each interview. After all interviews had been completed and notes had been cleaned, a content analysis was performed on the data using NVivo—a qualitative analysis software. The interviews were first reviewed to identify and enumerate themes in the data. Next, themes were organized into main and sub headings, referred to as parent and sub nodes, to develop an exhaustive and cogent coding scheme. Finally, this coding scheme was used during a second review of the data to identify patterns between themes and stakeholders for inclusion in this report.

3.4 Evaluability Assessment

An evaluability assessment was performed via a thorough review of the program documentation. Three domain areas were evaluated to conduct the assessment: organizational context (i.e., the climate and level of acceptance within the organization), availability of information to the evaluation team, and the program design. Relevant evaluation questions were developed corresponding to the three domains. The revised CREX program documentation was reviewed and coded for content, with specific focus on identifying the elements to be examined using the assessment protocol. It is important to note that particular attention was paid to the inclusion of key program design elements and the extent to which the materials demonstrate a clear and expected path from the program design to the desired outcomes. Findings and recommendations derived from the

documentation were solely focused on elements of best practices of program design generally, and no value judgment was made of the merits of the materials to counter radical ideologies or involvement in violent organizations. In other words, the program was judged solely in terms of its program design elements, not its grounding in CVE theory.

4. Findings and Recommendations

A complete evaluation report provided to the program outlines the full range of findings from the evaluation and provides several actionable recommendations for the program in the short-, and long-term. In general, the strengths of the program were identified as: (1) fitting a clear need, (2) generating open discussion among a diverse cross-section of the community in which the events are held, (3) allowing the opportunity for participants and community members to see varying perspectives, and (4) generating excitement around the idea of developing a community action plan to guide local initiatives. Several recommendations were provided regarding how the program could capitalize on these strengths and improve potential impact in other areas. These recommendations included improvements to communication protocols with the communities, staffing and support, and expansion and development of the action planning phase.

In addition to the technical aspects of the program, several recommendations were noted that would enhance the evaluability of the program in the long-term. Specifically, improvements in the program documentation, design, and implementation that would make future evaluation efforts more informative were highlighted. These recommendations were provided in the context of long-term evaluation planning. By building the evaluation component into the program, these critical issues become an important of routine program operation.

5. Implications and Utility

This evaluation provided benefits to the CREX program individually through the development of specific, actional recommendations. This effort also contributed to the larger goal of investigating a framework under which small, nascent or new programs can assess their current status and incorporate future evaluation planning into the design of the program. Guidance for how CVE-specific and other programs can use evaluability as a metric to assess the need for additional program development are in process.

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