Prevention Practitioners Network

Applying Research to Practice: A Practitioner's Framework for Prevention Programming

McCain Institute
Arizona State University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Targeted violence is increasingly threatening the safety and security of communities throughout the United States. Targeted violence refers to any violence against a specific target designed to intimidate or coerce a broader population, regardless of motive. Targeted violence includes school shootings, attacks on houses of worship, mass casualty incidents, hate crimes, and acts of terrorism. Over 645 mass shootings terrorized the United States in 2022, and the country is already on track to exceed that total in 2023. On May 13, 2023, President Biden declared white supremacy "the most dangerous terrorist threat" to the American homeland. The magnitude of these threats requires a whole-of-society response, including mental and behavioral health professionals, educators, community-based organizations, law enforcement, and philanthropy.

This framework provides practitioners with guidance on building sustainable programming in violence prevention that attracts long-term investment. Practitioners advancing this interdisciplinary field must proceed responsibly and ethically, drawing on available academic research to inform effective design, methods, and evaluation. By drawing on existing research and developing evaluable programs, practitioners contribute to the evidentiary support for the field over time.

In creating this framework, we consulted the 10 existing systematic reviews of the targeted violence and terrorism prevention field available at the time of publication. A systematic review is a meticulous examination of existing research to establish the state of current knowledge and to identify proven methods. After reviewing the systematic reviews, we identified evidence-informed takeaways that indicate promising practices and common missteps within the prevention field. Practitioners can consult these takeaways to adhere to promising practices in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their programs

Understanding the public health model is essential to understanding the most effective ways to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. Practitioners across the United States including the McCain Institute's Prevention Practitioners Network adapt the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) public health approach to violence prevention to their efforts to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. The public health approach is a four-step process consisting of defining and monitoring the problem, identifying risk and protective factors, developing and testing prevention strategies, and assuring widespread adoption. Central to this public health approach is the identification of risk and protective factors. While not predictive of violence, risk factors increase the likelihood that someone may turn violent. Protective factors, however, decrease this likelihood and provide a buffer against risk. Effective programs reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors.

Many types of programs contribute to violence prevention. For this guide, we utilized the US Department of Homeland Security's project tracks for their Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program: youth resilience, media literacy and online critical thinking initiatives, raising societal awareness, civic engagement, bystander training, referral services, threat assessment and management teams, and recidivism reduction and reintegration.

We have aligned the evidence-informed takeaways to the DHS TVTP project tracks. Within each section, we provide an overview of the project track, identify potential outcomes, and provide recommendations based on existing systematic reviews.
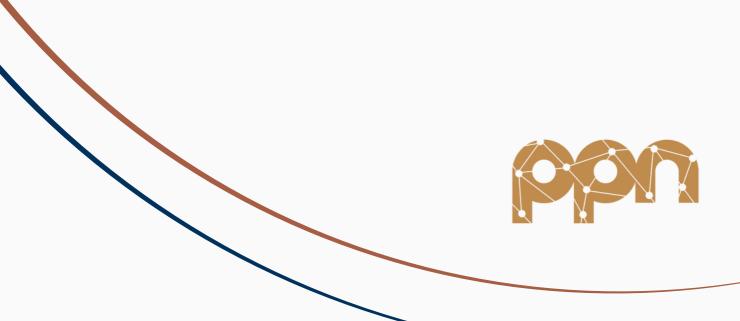
This document encompasses:
- An introduction to each project track
- Outcomes that can indicate success within each project track
- Evidence-informed takeaways to indicate promising practices and common missteps
- Additional resources and communities of funders
- Definitions of important terms

As you consult this guide, it is important to note that preventing targeted violence is an emerging field that draws upon research and promising practices from analogous fields like suicide prevention and combatting human trafficking. Additional research and program evaluations will supplement the initial list of key takeaways over time.

HALLMARKS OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAMS

- Integrate strong privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties policies and protections in all elements of program design.
- Adapt and tailor program design to local contexts and audiences. Do not replicate programs 'as is' because community needs and resources vary from one location to another.
- Do not target any cultural, religious, or ethnic group
- Design to reduce relevant risk factors and enhance protective factors. Do not expect any program to prove that an attack would have occurred without programming.
- Include adequate budgeting to cover all phases, from the design to implementation to maintenance to evaluation feedback loop.
- Prioritize consistency in partner participation – having the same partners involved from start to finish.
- Separate community partnership activities from intelligence-gathering activities. If participants feel that the program is collecting intelligence from their participation, participants will be unlikely to trust the program.
- Comprehensive training resources should be available year-round, not solely one-off. Training should directly align with end-user needs and priorities.
- Upstream prevention programs should address all violent ideologies.

Youth Resilience Programs

OVERVIEW

Increasingly, youth are experiencing exposure to violent content and ideologies. Even more concerning is that many individuals who engage in targeted violence do so in their youth. Youth resilience programs establish or expand programming that develops protective factors or reduces risk factors associated with escalating to violence amongst individuals younger than 24 years old. Examples of protective factors include trusted relationships with adults, social capital, a sense of belonging, and feelings of security.

Outcomes that can be used to measure the success of youth resilience programs include total audience reached, increased understanding of protective factors, and increased knowledge of online risks. Existing frameworks can also be adapted to measure outcomes for preventing youth resiliency programs such as the Positive Youth Development (PYD), the Career & College Readiness Self-Efficacy Inventory (CCRSI), and the Student Engagement Instrument.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Strengthen integration and a positive sense of identity among youth.
- Create and implement innovative approaches to address online radicalization.
- Improve community connectedness.

Media Literacy and Online Critical Thinking Initiatives

OVERVIEW

Violent actors and movements increasingly utilize the internet to share harmful content, recruit members, and promote propaganda. Initiatives to protect individuals and communities are necessary to combat the malicious use of the internet. Media literacy and online critical thinking initiatives develop and deliver programming that increases skills to recognize dangerous content and build resiliency against that content.

Efforts should focus on equipping communities and individuals with effective tools, knowledge, and resources. Topic examples could include understanding bias in communication, how communications attempt to target or persuade individuals and groups, or recognizing and verifying sources of information.

Ideal outcomes for media literacy and online critical thinking initiatives include increased knowledge of online content that could mobilize individuals towards violence, increased ability to identify harmful content, increased resiliency against harmful content, and increased ability to avoid harmful content.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Frame critical thinking interventions as opportunities for learners to adjust their thinking based on new information.
- Educate individuals on how to rationalize and legitimize content they are consuming.
- Create and implement innovative approaches to address online radicalization.
- Aim to reduce the availability of violent content online.
- Build capacity to leverage elements of the internet to reduce access to radicalizing. content and facilitate the distribution of alternative or counter-messaging.

Raising Societal Awareness

OVERVIEW

Efforts to raise societal awareness focus on educating the broader community on safety threats they may experience and concrete steps they can take to thwart them. Oftentimes, people outside the prevention field are unaware of the risks of targeted violence and terrorism in their communities. Even those who are often do not know where to report concerns. Members of the broader community, such as parents/caregivers, educators, faith leaders, law enforcement, and counselors are often the first to notice when someone's attitudes or behaviors have shifted. However, a lack of awareness about the issues of targeted violence may prevent community members from taking actions that could save lives. By learning about risk and protective factors, behavioral indicators, and reporting mechanisms, programs focused on raising societal awareness empower everyday citizens to protect their loved ones and communities.

Ideal outcomes for societal awareness initiatives include increased knowledge amongst community members, an increased number of community members aware of targeted violence and terrorism, an increased number of community members who know and can identify risk and protective factors, and increased confidence in community members to intervene when appropriate. It is important to consider the target audience of community members that a program is trying to reach to ensure the messaging of an awareness-raising effort is age and stage appropriate and tailored to the target audience.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- When designing campaigns, consider all the prospective outcomes, including unintended consequences.
- When using counter-narrative strategies, consider their overall effectiveness at targeting root causes of radicalization and not solely the desired end-states.
- Redirect individuals who search for violent extremist content to content that raises awareness of alternatives.
- Create initiatives that result in potential changes in both online and offline behavior.

Civic Engagement

OVERVIEW

Civic engagement is nonviolent activity designed to identify and address issues of public concern. In targeted violence prevention, this often means building and sustaining partnerships for the purpose of increasing understanding between groups to lessen fear or hatred in communities. Civic engagement initiatives build or expand programs that encourage community engagement, education, and resilience against individuals escalating to violence. Targeted violence is a threat to all community members, and building a more connected, engaged community will strengthen the community's awareness of and resiliency to targeted violence.

Ideal outcomes include increased community resilience to escalation to violence through the understanding of threat prevention, improved social cohesion, reduced inter-group tensions, and reduced youth vulnerability.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Increase the level of education and social well-being of less affluent individuals and families to reduce exclusion.
- Invest in the careful design and evaluation of the types of initiatives that help promote social connectedness to reduce violent extremism behavior.
- Clarify roles in preventing and managing violent extremism in communities.

Bystander Training

OVERVIEW

A bystander is someone who observes behaviors or language related to a person who may be considering acts of violence. Bystander training initiatives educate bystanders on recognizing concerning behaviors and identifying appropriate next steps, such as connecting an individual with services or calling law enforcement. An upstander is an individual that recognizes behaviors related to the pathway to violence and takes actions to intervene or interrupt that behavior.

Ideal outcomes for bystander training include increased willingness to act, knowledge of concerning behaviors, knowledge of available resources, knowledge of additional steps, and awareness of protective and risk factors.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Provide fully funded, efficient, evidence-based practitioner training programs for trusted community figures.
- Include focused assessment of potential biases of bystanders that may lead to falsely identifying individuals when implementing prevention programs.

Referral Services

OVERVIEW

Referral services establish or expand services to address crises with callers, assess whether they have risk factors, and provide resources and referrals to individuals seeking help. Services could be collected via a wide variety of communication platforms such as telephone, text, app, online, etc. Referral service programs need to consider each element from beginning to end. This includes training programs for service center members, engaging with vulnerable individuals, knowing proper protocols for when, whom, and where to escalate to, and having the capacity to ensure everyone that reaches out for services connects with the appropriate endpoint.

The target audience for referral service programs are individuals either currently experiencing a crisis or are concerned about an individual having a crisis. Because of this factor, referral services must have strict standards and protocols that maintain "do no harm" practices.

Ideal outcomes for referral services include increased capacity to receive calls, reduced length of time from initial outreach to connect with services, increased accuracy in connecting individuals with the appropriate services, and increased service area.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Create and implement theoretical frameworks that guide online referral services.
- Explore referral services for individuals who may have already consumed content, have been radicalized by extremist ideologies, or have moved to increasingly radical platforms.
- Adopt clear inclusion criteria and collect baseline data.
- Establish appropriate methods and practices to measure impact or effectiveness.

THREAT ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT TEAMS

OVERVIEW

Threat assessment and management teams provide alternatives to investigation and prosecution for bystanders seeking intervention assistance for individuals at risk of mobilizing to violence. The primary goal of threat assessment and management teams is to intervene before an individual mobilizes to violence and connect that individual with relevant support services.

As the threat of targeted violence is multi-faceted, effective threat assessment and management teams are often multi-disciplinary. Relevant disciplines include education administrators, mental health and social service providers, faith leaders, medical personnel, law enforcement, and technology experts.

Ideal outcomes for threat assessment and management teams include an increase in cases that are de-escalating, increases in referrals for outside services (e.g., mental health, substance abuse, job skills, housing assistance), increased bandwidth to manage cases, increased success at correctly identifying threats, and increased availability of intervention programs.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Adopt clear inclusion criteria and baseline data.
- Establish appropriate methods and practices to measure impact and effectiveness.
- Create and implement weighted risk assessment instruments and alternative interventions.
- Tailor risk assessment and treatment to the individual's needs and specific risk factors that are present in their community. It cannot be a one size fits all approach.
- Develop comprehensive information-sharing policies and facilitate efficient transfer of information to partners.

Threat Assessment and Management Teams

- Make psychological counseling and/or psychotherapy available at no cost to the participants. This can be provided to clients as a complement to group-setting interventions.
- Allow interventions to run for extended periods to foster mid- to long-term behavioral changes.
- Tailor interventions to decrease specific family-related risk factors and increase specific-family related protective factors.
- Implement a systemic framework that allows family members to play a role in the intervention process.
- Online or digital interventions:
  - Create and implement theoretical frameworks that guide online interventions and/or campaigns.
  - Create and implement online interventions that result in potential changes in both online and offline behavior.
  - Explore interventions for individuals who may have already consumed content, have been radicalized by extremist ideologies, or moved to more radical platforms.

Recidivism Reduction and Reintegration

OVERVIEW

To support the prosperity of individuals re-entering society, recidivism reduction and reintegration programs aim to reduce risk factors and promote protective factors in individuals re-entering society following release from correctional facilities and in probation or deferral programs.

Recidivism is the tendency for individuals who have previously committed a crime to re-offend.

Re-entry is the transition from life in jail or prison to life in the community. Reintegration is the process of assisting the re-entry of individuals resulting in increased opportunities to succeed when they return to their communities. This includes steps while still incarcerated, transition programs, and post-re-entry programming. These core concepts within the criminal justice field directly apply to targeted violence prevention.

Ideal outcomes for recidivism reduction and reintegration programs include increased success in reducing repeat offenders, increased participation from individuals either incarcerated or recently leaving incarceration, increased resource availability, and increased rehabilitation program completion.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE INCLUDE:

- Make psychological counseling and/or psychotherapy available at no cost to the participants. This can be provided to clients as a complement to group-setting interventions
- Increase individualized employment/vocational training availability and prioritize efficient and evidence-based training programs.
- Allow interventions to run for extended periods to foster mid- to long-term behavioral changes.

Prevention Practitioners Network

The Prevention Practitioners Network (PPN) is a national network of interdisciplinary professionals dedicated to preventing targeted violence, terrorism, and their impacts within the United States.

PPN brings together the leading experts in psychology, psychiatry, social work, community and public safety, justice, education, trauma, criminology, sociology, and law enforcement to develop a community of practice. The focus of PPN is to convene practitioners across disciplines who are at the front lines of violence prevention, including first responders, clinicians taking referrals, judges, and law enforcement.

As a network, we conduct workshops and facilitate symposia that bridge the gap among these practitioners. Together, we discuss interdisciplinary approaches to common challenges experienced in the field. The network serves as a guiding body for organizations and institutions across the United States who are not only looking for partners and collaborative support but also best practices in a field that previously lacked resources for practitioners.

The network has expanded to include over 1,200 members participating in online workshops, attending symposia, and leveraging network resources.

At the 2023 International Counterterrorism Conference, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas praised PPN, describing it as a network "comprised of hundreds of interdisciplinary professionals who have created evidence-based trainings and resources for prevention program design, and a registry of mental and behavioral health clinicians who can receive and process targeted violence and terrorism prevention referrals.

National Directory

PPN is building an inclusive index of multi-stage violence prevention resources and clinically licensed mental and behavioral health providers. Scan the QR code or you can download the app on your smartphone.

Previous Work and Publications

PPN conducts workshops and facilitates symposia and trainings, addressing the gaps, challenges, and best practices in the interdisciplinary field of violence prevention. Recordings can be found on our website.

Some of the resources PPN publishes in partnership with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue are these practice guides for practitioners:
· Preventing Targeted Violence and Terrorism: A Guide for Practitioners
· Interventions to Prevented Targeted Violence and Terrorism
· Legal Considerations for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention
· The Targeted Violence Threat Landscape
· Behavioral Assessment and Management
· Prevention Through Education

To join the network or any of our committees, or if you have any questions, please email PractitionersNetwork@McCainInstitute.org.

DEFINITIONS

Bystander: someone who is positioned to observe behaviors related to a person who maybe considering acting violently.

Source: DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

Domestic terrorism: activities that
1. Involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State;
2. Appear to be intended to:
    a. Intimidate or coerce a civilian population;
    b. To influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or
    c. To affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and
3. Occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States

Source: 18 U.S.C. § 2331(5)

Domestic violent extremist: the FBI and DHS define a Domestic Violent Extremist (DVE) as an individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism and may be constitutionally protected.

Source: NDAA Domestic Terrorism Strategic Report, 2021

Primary prevention: primary prevention takes place BEFORE violence initially occurs. It involves programs and strategies designed to reduce the factors that put people at risk for experiencing violence. Or they encourage the factors that protect or buffer people from violence.

Source: https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/pop/assets/pdfs/pop_notebook.pdf

Protective factors: positive characteristics that may decrease the likelihood of an individual moving toward violence

Source: DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

Radicalization to violence: the process wherein an individual comes to believe, for a variety of reasons, that the threat or use of violence is necessary – or justified – to accomplish a goal

Source: DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

Risk factors: negative characteristics that may increase the likelihood that an individual is moving toward violence

Source: DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

Secondary prevention: secondary prevention takes place immediately AFTER a violent event. It deals with the short-term consequences and focuses on the victim's immediate needs—such as emergency services or medical care.

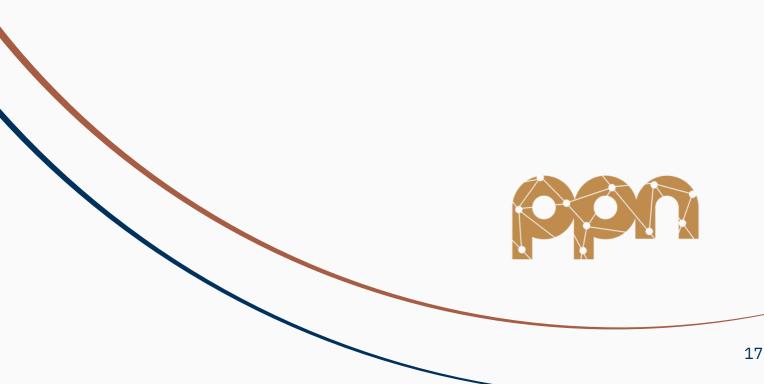Source: https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/pop/assets/pdfs/pop_notebook.pdf

Targeted violence:

1. involves acts dangerous to human life that are in violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State and that: a) involve a degree of planning and b) involve a pre-identified target including: i) individual(s) based on actual or perceived identity traits or group affiliation or ii) property based on actual or perceived identity traits or group affiliation; and

2. appears intended to: a) intimidate, coerce, or otherwise impact a broader population beyond the target(s) of the immediate act; or b) generate publicity for the perpetrator or his or her grievances; and

3. occurs within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States; and

4. excludes acts of interpersonal violence,[1] street or gang-related crimes, violent crimes perpetrated by organized crime syndicates or similar organizations, or financially motivated crimes.

Source: DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

Tertiary prevention: tertiary prevention is a long-term approach AFTER a violent event has occurred. Efforts may include rehabilitation of the perpetrator, or social services to lessen emotional trauma to the victim.

Source: https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/pop/assets/pdfs/pop_notebook.pdf

Systematic Reviews

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Contact:
PractitionersNetwork@McCainInstitute.org