Canada Centre 2023 Conference on Countering Radicalization to Violence: What to Measure, How to Prevent – Ottawa, Canada May 1-5, 2023

Building a **safe** and **resilient Canada**

At a time of converging drivers and vulnerabilities that are propelling extreme, grievance-fueled forms of violence, Public Safety's Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence (Canada Centre) designed its fourth international conference on countering radicalization to violence (CRV) around the theme of '**What to measure, how to prevent.**' The idea was to emphasize the importance of research, evaluation, and knowledge exchange between experts and practitioners for adapting prevention to this complex environment. What follows are select highlights, with further detail about particular sessions and presentations available from the Canada Centre upon request.

Canada

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Aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Conférence 2023 du Centre canadien sur la lutte contre la radicalisation menant à la violence : Que mesurer, comment prévenir – Ottawa Canada, du 1er au 5 mai 2023

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Highlights

The conference brought together 320 attendees from 16 countries, including more than 100 speakers and panelists. Highlights included:

- The Minister of Public Safety announced [$25 million for projects to counter radicalization to violence through the Canada Centre's Community Resilience Fund](#),
- A video message to conference attendees from former New Zealand Prime Minister and now Special Envoy for the Christchurch Call to Action, Jacinda Ardern.
- The launch of the next phase in [Tech Against Terrorism's Terrorist Content Analytics Platform,](#) to identify and halt the spread of terrorist content on the internet.
- Keynote presentations featured:
  - Dr. Ghayda Hassan, the founder and director of the Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV);
  - Paul Ash, the New Zealand Prime Minister's Special Representative on Cyber and Digital;
  - Founder and CEO of Moonshot, Vidhya Ramalingam;
  - Dr. Sara Budge from Life After Hate;
  - Australian National University's Dr. Emily Corner; and
  - Dr. John Picarelli, Director of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention at the US National Security Council.
- Special side events included
  - A meeting of Canada's [National Experts Committee on Countering Radicalization to Violence](#); and,
  - Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism [workshops](#).

The conference began by focusing on the latest evidence about pathways of radicalization to violence, including who is targeted by current forms of ideological and grievance-fueled violence, and the impacts on victims and survivors. The conference then showcased leading approaches to countering radicalization to violence, which drew upon related fields of prevention such as countering hate, gender-based violence and the harmful impacts of dis/misinformation. As the week progressed, participants examined

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barriers and solutions for adapting prevention to complex settings, with sessions bringing together evidence and lessons learned to inform ongoing work to further develop and professionalize countering radicalization to violence across Canada and internationally. Some prominent areas identified for greater concerted effort included:

- Developing a 'second generation' of multi-agency models for intervening with complex, high-risk cases, based on deeper, shared understanding about threats and what is possible for prevention between sectors like health, social services, education, policing and security, along with community partners.
- Building a 'fourth generation' of risk assessment tools better tailored to contemporary understanding of pathways to violence and the needs of frontline practitioners.
- Expanding relationships with sectors adjacent to countering radicalization to violence like social work and education, including to help further raise the bar on professional standards.
- Connecting frontline service providers with more partners in the tech sector, as part of growing efforts to reach the vulnerable and at-risk online.
- Improving coordination and quality of data collection to strengthen the evidence base, with greater attention to using common metrics across regions and countries, as well as setting best practices for gathering and protecting information.
- Supporting frontline practitioners and researchers by addressing needs related to their mental health, safety and security.
- Bringing in a wider range of perspectives such as from rural and remote settings, from younger and older generations, and from more communities and identity groups to help better understand the norms, grievances and social networks shaping violent extremist movements; and contribute to the knowledge, strengths and protective factors to strengthen responses to contemporary threats.

Pathways towards violence in a context of converging drivers

Throughout the week, presenters spoke about the evolving threat landscape, including an increasingly polarized social context. They further pointed to convergence in how a range of violent extremist movements target grievances against transgender and 2SLGBTQI+ communities. Additionally, misogyny, antisemitism and Islamophobia continue to be prominent across milieus. Much of the conference focused on ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE), such as white supremacist, anti-authority, and gender and identity-driven forms, with a number of speakers examining not only the 'composite' or 'salad bar' forms of ideologically motivated violent extremism that combine grievances in personalized and changing combinations, but also noting connections to religiously motivated forms. The proliferation of mis/dis/mal-information (MDM) and dangerous conspiracy theories was another common concern, including how they can exacerbate grievances as well complicate efforts by governments and practitioners to understand and address radicalization to violence. Further, while online environments like gaming communities were not seen as direct causes of violent extremism, presenters noted how such contexts can foster normalization of hatred and violence, where malign actors can, and do, take advantage.

Presenters noted that while incidents of terrorism and violent extremism remain rare, the complexity and variation in types, as well as the limited number of cases on which to base analysis, present ongoing challenges for identifying meaningful warning signs. New research presented at the conference to address such gaps included a systematic review of evidence about pathways towards violent extremism. In a soon-to-be published study ([4th Systematic Review: Research Overview](#)) by CPN-PREV on the main trajectories in and out of violence, and the most significant markers or change or relapse, close to half of the pathways identified involved changes tied to psychological factors. Examples include grievances, personal motivations, mental health and cognitive factors, thrill seeking, trauma, and distress, as well as search for identity and meaning. Other presenters then noted how different clusters of such factors can shape or drive distinct pathways, such as socialization into violent extremism, versus criminal pathways towards involvement, versus pathways more based in psychological instability. One socialization pathway of notable current concern for presenters was where children are

socialized by parents into violent extremist ideologies, along with involvement of families in the activities of groups and movements.

A common point of emphasis was how key drivers of risk and threat are not static, with evidence of risk occurring in waves, and with changes to context being central to such changes. These findings underscore the importance of assessing vulnerable or at-risk persons in their environment. Supporting this more contextualized and dynamic approach, several speakers noted evidence that a key turning point for when pathways can turn violent is the moment of loss or weakening of protective factors, such as loss of key relationships or social supports. Adding weight to these research findings, frontline practitioners themselves highlighted the importance of examining individuals' personal histories in context, to identify not only risks tied to grievance, but other needs and vulnerabilities that can increase susceptibility to involvement in violent extremism.

Opportunities for prevention and promising models

The importance of considering vulnerabilities and protective factors in countering radicalization to violence was further developed in presentations about opportunities for prevention and successes. Practitioners shared how relatively common it is for those heading down pathways towards serious violence to speak out in the hope that someone intervenes, and how significant numbers of those consuming violent extremist material online respond positively to offers for services and help. Several practitioners highlighted that for some violent extremist circles, participants 'want to talk' especially around major incidents of violence or events like the Ottawa occupation or January 6 in Washington, DC, arguing that prevention programs need to be ready to respond.

Practitioners also shared experiences of success in building rapport and 'therapeutic relationships' with complex clients holding extreme forms of grievance, by focusing on building strengths. Examples included through helping model pro-social behaviours and relationships, and helping navigate social services. Further, descriptions of these successes showed the reliance on multi-disciplinary teams that bring together practitioners with expertise and standards from fields like social work and clinical health, with community-based partners and mentors. Practitioners also highlighted the importance of working closely with researchers, who can provide the deep expertise to more thoroughly understand the person in their own environment.

Bringing such lessons together, the conference featured the launch of results from a recent pilot partnership in Canada to reach vulnerable/at-risk individuals engaging with violent extremist content online through advertising locally based psychosocial support services. The partnership was between Moonshot, the Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) team in Ontario, and Recherche et Action sur les Polarisation Sociales (RAPS) in Quebec, with the CPN-PREV supporting on best practice guidance and evaluation. Details are now available through the public report [Countering Radicalization to Violence in Ontario and Quebec: Canada's First Online-Offline Interventions Model](#), but notable is how the pilot demonstrated the possible in reaching the difficult-to-reach online, including those in more rural and remote areas. In particular, the initiative developed messaging to appeal to vulnerabilities and grievances, such as anger, frustration, exhaustion, and isolation; to offer services in response; and to train and equip frontline practitioners to safely, and more effectively engage with the kinds of vulnerable/at-risk participants of concern. As part of the Minister's announcement of new funding through the Community Resilience Fund, this pilot will now be expanding to involve more frontline programs across Canada.

Ongoing barriers and challenges for prevention

While the conference demonstrated advances in the field of countering radicalization to violence, the program also focused on the ongoing needs and burdens for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and community members. For example, those working with complex cases may be managing multiple kinds of violence risk for a single client, which can fluctuate significantly and rapidly over time. Those trained and willing to accept high-risk clients can be few in number, face a heavy workload, and confront challenges for building empathy and rapport with clients given nature of grievances. Given how frequently forms of violent extremism target women and various minority communities, examples of attacks on a practitioner's own identity as well as physical safety concerns were discussed by several presenters. Practitioners also noted how the burden of sometimes being one of the only pro-social supports for clients adds to the difficulty of setting boundaries for their own health and well-being.

The limitations of tools, training and support was also a common theme. While presenters noted that much has been learned about more effective approaches to

working with complex clients, several argued that the design, testing and evidence behind key tools such as for risk assessment are increasingly found to be insufficient. For example, some of the common specialized tools for countering radicalization to violence provide limited guidance on how to bring together the range of individual and contextual factors highlighted at the conference. This gap is a barrier to understanding the risk in a specific case of an individual radicalizing towards violence. Similarly, once a practitioner has gathered together the relevant factors, there is limited guidance on how to identify likely trajectories, including what kinds of changes could lead to violence. Further, efforts to test such tools have typically focused narrowly on the validity of specific metrics, and little on how they are used in practice at key stages of prevention, from assessing a case, to developing an intervention approach, to monitoring change in risk, need, vulnerability and protective factors.

Barriers in different prevention contexts were also an area of focus. Several presenters noted how countering radicalization to violence programs are often designed for urban settings as well as reliant upon them, given the range of services and expertise that might be necessary. But recent trends are for growing needs to adapt prevention for rural and remote areas. For school settings, concerns were raised about the pressure on educators and educational support staff to appropriately recognize and respond to early signs of violence risk, when there is limited training, and a lack of resources or support.

For both such broader social settings such as schools, as well as for specialized programs to intervene with high risk cases, presenters highlighted opportunities to work with other sectors, as well as with families and communities. At the same time, experts noted how such networked prevention models are difficult to establish and maintain. In addition to more general burdens on sectors like health and social services, there remains significant fear and stigma around violent extremism, and reluctance to engage. Several practitioners and researchers noted how specialized prevention efforts for countering radicalization to violence can sometimes be 'set up to fail.' Their hard work to turn people away from violence by developing strengths can run into closed doors from more mainstream social services, housing, employment and education sectors.

Avenues for solution and next steps

Much of the discussion at the conference about 'where next' focused on advocating for more concerted effort to address the barriers and challenges through harnessing the growing body of evidence and lessons learned towards a 'next generation' of countering radicalization to violence – encompassing policy, program design, resources and tools for prevention, as well as methods for research and evaluation.

Drawing on recent research in North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, Scandinavia and Australia, presenters proposed a 'second generation' of multi-agency models for intervening with complex, high-risk cases. This next stage would include deeper, shared understanding between sectors like health, social services, education, policing and security, as well as community partners, not only about how to assess risk, but what is possible in de-escalating complex cases, as well as for rehabilitation and reintegration. Clearer roles and responsibilities for these different sectors was also held up as central for progress including guidance about information sharing. Additionally, both researchers and practitioners called for protocols to help improve how distinct areas of work, such as investigation versus counselling, can complement each other and avoid potential conflicts.

Related to improved collaboration, presenters also advocated for more concerted effort to develop a 'fourth generation' of risk assessment tools. Such tools would be better tailored to contemporary understanding of pathways to violence. Additionally, this next generation would be more tailored to the needs of frontline practitioners, including how those needs can differ across roles, sectors and stages in assessing and managing cases. The aim would be enable each to develop a more thorough picture of the person in context as well as potential trajectories, including to inform multi-agency models.

In light of the complex drivers and threat landscape reviewed at the conference, the need to improve coordination in data collection to strengthen evidence-based practices stood out. It remains the case that different countries – even with similar threat environments – are often focusing on tracking domestic trends, or evaluating prevention programs on a case-by-case basis. By design, the conference theme of 'What to measure, how to prevent,' was in part to help advance collaboration on development and use of common metrics, towards a larger, shared evidence base. Participants

responded with a range of opportunities and strong interest, and it will be important to maintain momentum.

Strategic engagement with sectors adjacent to or implicated by countering radicalization to violence was another common area of focus. Participants noted examples of progress in reducing fear and reluctance in fields like social work and education, through raising awareness about countering radicalization to violence. But such engagement remains limited. Work to broaden and deepen partnerships with key professions was portrayed as fundamental to a second generation of multi-agency models. But raising awareness and providing training is not always enough. When working across sectors, professionals from fields like health, social services and education also need reassurance in areas like information management and client confidentiality.

Now with growing efforts to connect frontline service providers with the tech sector, including to reach the vulnerable and at-risk online, such questions about professional standards and information management are taking on another layer of complexity. The Moonshot pilot partnership with Estimated Time of Arrival, Recherche et Action sur les Polarisation Sociales, and the CPN-PREV focused on such questions from the outset. With the launch of the partnership's next phase in Canada, as well as parallel initiatives in the United States and elsewhere, there is further opportunity to build best practices for a second generation of multi-agency models that include the online sphere.

Support for practitioners and researchers within countering radicalization to violence was also an important theme. Addressing needs related to their mental health, safety and security is receiving more attention in the field, but this remains a recent development. Participants called for greater focus on tools, training and support for the safety and well-being of practitioners and researchers, including to avoid burnout and trauma such as from exposure to harmful content.

Finally, presenters highlighted the need to diversify the voices, sectors and actors that play a role in countering radicalization to violence. Several speakers noted the limited understanding about rural and remote settings: both the norms, cultures, grievances and social networks relevant to violent extremist movements and milieu; and the knowledge, strengths and protective factors available to draw upon for better

understanding and responding to threats in such contexts. Similarly, conference participants emphasized the important knowledge, experience and perspectives of survivors and victims, youth, older generations, and various communities and identity groups targeted by violent extremist groups and movements. Conference participants emphasized that these voices can play an important role in challenging and informing research, policies and programs not only to address bias, but to improve the design and implementation of countering radicalization to violence efforts more generally.