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Evaluating interventions to disengage extremist offenders: a study of the proactive integrated support model (PRISM)

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ABSTRACT

The literature recognises that the evaluation of interventions to counter violent extremism (CVE) has been neglected. This paper fills this gap by providing results from a study of a disengagement programme in the Australian state of New South Wales. The Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) is a pilot intervention delivered by Corrective Services NSW aimed at prison inmates who have a conviction for terrorism or have been identified as at risk of radicalisation. PRISM is delivered by a team of allied health staff and a Religious Support Officer who work with other stakeholders and professionals. This paper looks at early results of the PRISM intervention focusing on a range of issues, which include client engagement and the content of intervention plans, self-reported motivations to participate in the intervention, benefits of participation, tackling the ideological component of violent extremism, connection to the community corrections context, and implementation challenges. Data is derived from interviews with programme staff, corrective services personnel and also clients of the intervention (i.e. convicted terrorist and radicalised inmates and parolees). Results are linked to existing literature on disengagement and implications for CVE programme evaluation are highlighted. Limitations in the study design are acknowledged.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been the proliferation of programmes aimed at preventing radicalisation and disengaging known violent extremists (El-Said, 2015; Koehler, 2017). This includes prisoner de-radicalisation programmes and initiatives focused on the community reintegration of former convicted extremists (El-Said, 2015; Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Koehler, 2017; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; Webber et al., 2017; Weggemans & de Graaf, 2017). However there is consensus in the literature that there have been few primary source studies on the implementation and impact of prison and community-based initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism (CVE) (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; Silke &

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Veldhuis, 2017). This means there is a lack of existing evidence to help inform the design, delivery and evaluation of CVE interventions.

This paper aims to address this deficit by providing results from a study of an intervention targeting radicalised prisoners in the Australian state of New South Wales, termed the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM). PRISM is delivered by Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) and has been operating as a pilot intervention since 2016. Insights from correctional and programme staff, as well as clients are drawn on in relation to the programme's early operation. While this study is not an assessment of programme impact in relation to measuring whether PRISM reduces recidivism or levels of violent extremism over time, the paper provides a summary of PRISM and data related to its aims, achievements and implementation. It also highlights a range of tentative intervention outcomes (e.g. reported changes in self-perceptions and benefits derived from participation). Results provide lessons for how to evaluate such complex interventions. While the research design can be described as comprising an ethnographic study of PRISM, drawing on 'knowledgeable informants' i.e. interview data from programme staff and clients (Agar, 2008; Johnson, 1990), it encompasses elements of process evaluation given its examination of PRISM's design, content and implementation, as well as staff and client interactions and responses to the intervention (Hansen, 2005; Moore et al., 2015; Oakley, Strange, Bonell, Allen, & Stephenson, 2006; Palfrey, Thomas, & Phillips, 2012).

The paper is structured as follows. Relevant literature is reviewed in order to place this study and the PRISM intervention in the broader context of CVE interventions and debates, particularly as they relate to prison-based programmes and the operation and evaluation of CVE initiatives. This is then followed by a short summary of the roles of CSNSW and the operational environment relating to terrorism, with the PRISM intervention outlined. The study's methodology will then be described, with limitations in the study design highlighted. Results from interviews with correctional and PRISM staff, including parolees and prisoners, are presented and focus on the following topics: client engagement and intervention plans, motivations for programme participation, self-reported benefits of participation, tackling ideology, links to the community corrections context, and finally operational challenges. Results are linked to broader issues relating to the design, implementation and evaluation of CVE interventions thus providing suggestions for future evaluations and highlighting challenges associated with the assessment of such initiatives.

It needs to be acknowledged that PRISM had been operating for 15 months when this study was conducted in 2017. Hence this study focuses on an operational period from early 2016 to mid-2017. The assessment of the PRISM intervention occurred as part of a larger project conducted by the author into the release and reintegration of extremist offenders in NSW. For the purpose of brevity, the terms 'extremist offender' and 'radicalised offender' will be used interchangeably in this paper as encompassing the same cohort.

Issues highlighted in the literature

A review by Neumann (2010) examined the issue of prison radicalisation and de-radicalisation across a number of English and non-English speaking jurisdictions. One focus of this international review was rehabilitation programmes targeting terrorist inmates. Neumann (2010) identified a mix of country specific approaches that were the result of unique contexts and conditions. Neumann (2010) concluded there was variation in the emphasis

placed on addressing different push and pull factors that lead individuals into and away from extremism (e.g. differences in the prominence given to religious dialogue or the level of financial assistance provided to family members of convicted terrorists). While there is not the space to review these country specific interventions in detail, Neumann (2010) identified a number of 'key ingredients', which included a focus on religious re-education and vocational training; the use of credible interlocutors who can relate to prisoners' personal and psychological needs; strategies to help convicted terrorists to disassociate from extremist social networks and fostering family and community ties and connections; the provision of economic and social opportunities and incentives (e.g. work opportunities and family assistance) and help with reintegration when inmates are released from prison. El-Said (2015) also identifies key components of CVE programmes targeting known terrorists and at-risk individuals. From his review he identifies the following features as essential in addressing the needs of intervention clients: religious rehabilitation, education and vocational training, psychological rehabilitation, social (economic) support, family rehabilitation and post-care/release support. How these features are operationalised in practice through the PRISM intervention is explored below.

CVE programmes do face implementation challenges. This includes the degree to which they are perceived as legitimate and beneficial among target groups, which can influence levels of participation. This has been observed as a problem in the context of the CHANNEL programme in the U.K (Cherney, 2016). There can be constraints and sensitivities around information sharing between agencies, such as between police and other service providers. Weggemans and de Graaf (2017) found this to be the case in relation to reintegration programmes targeting terrorist detainees in the Netherlands. Multi-agency approaches are a typical feature of CVE interventions, with these partnerships sometimes being challenging to maintain given varying levels of commitment among partners and interest in CVE, different ways of operating across agencies, and stakeholder expectations around what should be the focus of an initiative (Ambrozik, 2018; Cherney, 2016; Mastroe, 2016; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016). As far as the author is aware there have been few empirical studies on the delivery of prison-based interventions such as PRISM, with existing studies mainly being descriptive (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015; Koehler, 2017; however see Webber et al., 2017). The practical implementation challenges encountered in the delivery of PRISM will be examined.

Another key challenge is also how to evaluate CVE programmes and identifying indicators of success. This can be influenced by whether one should be defining CVE interventions as concerned with de-radicalisation or disengagement. This is particularly relevant to secondary and tertiary prevention programmes that focus on known terrorists or individuals identified as at risk of radicalising to extremism. The distinction between de-radicalisation and disengagement has been debated in the literature, with the conclusion that there is a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding both terms (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). De-radicalisation is commonly defined as encompassing a cognitive transformation in which there is the abandonment of ideas and worldviews that justify or encourage the use of violence (Horgan, 2014; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016). Triggering changes in ideological beliefs is seen as particularly relevant to CVE programmes that emphasise de-radicalisation (Boucek, 2008; Horgan, 2008b; Koehler, 2017); however, whether CVE programmes actually achieve this aim is up for debate, with no agreed upon way by which de-radicalisation should be measured (El-Said, 2015; Horgan, 2014; Horgan & Braddock, 2010;

Schmid, 2013). On the other hand, disengagement is regarded as a form of behavioural transformation in which an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent participation (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). The problem for CVE programmes is that this can occur without any formal intervention, in which, for example, an individual over time becomes disengaged due to burnout or becoming disillusioned (Barrelle, 2015; Koehler, 2017). The implication is that a terrorist offender may be disengaged but still hold radicalised views (i.e. believe in the cause but reject violence as a legitimate tactic). While academics might argue that disengagement is a more realistic goal of CVE programmes – particularly those in prison (e.g. see Silke, 2011), authorities or agencies delivering or sponsoring these interventions may have less tolerance and more aversion to simply achieving the goal of disengagement. The problem, however, is that prioritising the goal of de-radicalisation – while laudable and in some cases politically necessary to satisfy programme funders – may set up initiatives for failure given the challenge in measuring such an outcome. In this paper the term ‘disengagement’ is used given this is how PRISM staff described the intervention’s focus. However, regardless of the way it might be defined, disengagement does require both a cognitive and behavioural shift (Horgan, 2008b; Koehler, 2017).

These conceptual issues also draw attention to debates surrounding the types of indicators that can (or should) be used to evaluate CVE interventions. One obvious indicator is that of recidivism as a key outcome measure. Again, this makes sense as a laudable goal of CVE interventions, particularly as it relates to terrorist inmates, in that one wants to reduce their risk of terrorist reoffending if released. However, as to whether CVE programmes achieve this is unclear. For example, Silke (2014) claims ‘terrorist prisoners have very low reconviction rates’ (p. 111). Silke bases this statement on research that examines the prior criminal records of terrorists to see if they have a history of terrorist-related offences (e.g. Bakker, 2006; Sageman, 2004). Silke (2014), referring to U.K. data on prisoners convicted for terrorism between 2001 and 2008, estimates that less than five per cent of released terrorist prisoners will be reconvicted for another terrorist-related offence. This estimation was derived from a period when there were no dedicated de-radicalisation programmes operating in U.K. prisons. However, it must be noted that calculating the terrorist recidivism rates of released terrorists is extremely difficult, with there being no national databases that record such information or any baseline measure to which one can actually compare (Koehler, 2017). As pointed out by Marsden (2015), a lack of recidivism does not mean that an intervention has been effective, with many other external factors having an influence on an extremist offender’s reoffending, which, for example, can be related to family reasons – e.g. the impact of one’s terrorist conviction on family members, or the intensity of surveillance and restrictions placed on an extremist offender when in prison or released into the community. The implication of Marsden’s (2015) argument for CVE programme evaluation is that a number of indicators of success need to be considered. For instance, this can relate to factors associated with desistance from offending, such as changes in self-perceptions (Giordano, 2014; Marsden, 2017). Some of these indicators are explored when examining the PRISM intervention.

A further complication to the evaluation of CVE programmes is the fact that their content and delivery can vary enormously (Koehler, 2017). This makes developing consistent and uniform indicators of success challenging. This is compounded by the lack of programme evaluation that makes it hard to identify the essential components of an

intervention. This variation is particularly pronounced when it comes to tackling religious beliefs. Koehler (2017) makes the point that tackling religious opinions is controversial in many Western countries, which has led to an avoidance of attempts at religious ‘re-education’ within some CVE interventions. However, in other jurisdictions, such as Muslim majority countries, this is emphasised (El-Said, 2015). For example, the much-lauded Saudi Arabia programme has a heavy focus on religious re-education on Islam (Boucek, 2008). Again, whether such counter narratives against extremist beliefs have an effect on the beliefs and behaviours of convicted terrorists or individuals at risk of radicalising to violence is still unclear, but there is anecdotal evidence it can make a difference (El-Said, 2015). The first step in knowing whether this is the case is identifying the types of practices that can help to trigger ideological reframing, with the promotion of critical thinking skills seen as important in this regard (Koehler, 2017; Marsden, 2017). This is tentatively explored when examining the PRISM intervention.

The PRISM intervention

Each state and territory¹ in Australia has responsibility for its own prison system. Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) has responsibility for managing the adult prison system and offenders released into the NSW community. In NSW there are different community release options, with the most serious offenders assessed by the state’s parole authority as eligible for release on parole. On average, the total adult prison population in NSW numbers around 13,000 across 36 facilities (see <http://www.correctiveservices.justice.nsw.gov.au/>). Inmates charged for terrorist-related offences in NSW are classified as AA inmates.² At the time of writing there were 35 AA classified inmates in the NSW prison system (specifically as of 4/1/2018, which includes sentenced and un-sentenced offenders). This count does not include inmates designated as having a national security interest (NSI) status, which can include prisoners who have not been charged for terrorism but have been identified as presenting a national security risk due to concerns about their links with known or suspected violent extremists. NSW has the highest number of terrorist inmates compared to other Australian states and territories. For example, the state of Queensland has two inmates in custody for terrorist-related offences, while Victoria has twenty (Bucci & Olding, 2017). Compared to other countries the terrorist threat in Australia is less pronounced. For example according to the Global Terrorism Database Australia has experienced a total of 104 incidents of terrorism from 1970 to 2016, compared to 5202 incidents in the U.K. for the same period.

PRISM is a pilot intervention that is aimed at prison inmates who have a conviction for terrorism or have been identified as at risk of radicalisation due to specific behaviours and/or links with known extremists. It is delivered by a team of psychologists who work in partnership with a religious support officer (Muslim Chaplain/Imam), Services and Programs Officers,³ allied health professionals and other agencies identified for involvement in an individual’s case assessment and intervention plan. PRISM is the only dedicated prison-based intervention in Australia targeting adult extremist offenders. Its primary focus is on prison inmates, but as will be indicated below, it does reach into the community supervision context when offenders are released on parole.

The process of engaging an offender in the PRISM intervention occurs two years out from their earliest possible release date. This period of engagement is simply an

outcome of operational decision-making as to the most perceived ideal time to engage potential clients. However this period of client commencement will change in the future towards achieving earlier periods of initiation, with funding being extended to December 2020. PRISM requires the voluntary consent of the offender. Referrals to the intervention come from custodial sources, such as the Correctional Intelligence Group,⁴ with offenders in some circumstances also requesting to participate in the intervention. Once consent is obtained, a risk and needs assessment is undertaken that informs the development of an individual treatment plan. Consent is also provided for members of the PRISM team to contact family members and community supports.

PRISM does not operate like a traditional correctional intervention that has set modules, such as violent or sex offender programmes do. It is a support service that helps to address the psychological, social, theological and ideological needs of radicalised offenders that aims to redirect them away from extremism and help them transition out of custody. This is achieved through individually tailored intervention plans, the content of which can vary given the needs of offenders. As emphasised by PRISM staff, no one offender is alike and hence no two intervention plans are the same. This makes a great deal of sense when one considers that it is generally recognised in the literature that there is no clear terrorist profile, with variation existing in relation to the cohort's social background and motivation (Horgan, 2008a). As stated recently by Haggerty and Bucerius (2018), while the same attributes of radicalisation might be evident across different terrorist groups, this does not mean that all factors operate with the same degree of influence. Hence, there is variation as to which psychological, social, theological and ideological needs are the focus of an offender's PRISM intervention plan. PRISM staff, then, work with an offender one-on-one and undertake ongoing assessments to monitor progress. Again, the length of engagement in PRISM varies, with some participants having been released into the community on parole while others have not. Even when released on parole, PRISM staff will in some cases still continue to engage an offender for a period of time.

The PRISM caseload is split between offenders who have been charged for a terrorist offence, and those showing vulnerabilities to extremism due to radicalising in prison, or having co-offenders⁵ who have been identified as persons of national security interest by police, or are known or suspected extremists. For confidentiality reasons the author is not able to provide numbers on the exact split according to these groups. The majority of offenders participating in the intervention are Muslim, with there also being a small number of far-right offenders, which included one at the time the research was conducted. At the time of data collection 13 male inmates had engaged in the PRISM intervention, with some having been released on parole.

Method

As noted in the introduction, data presented in this paper is drawn from research undertaken as part of a broader project examining the transition of extremist offenders into the community when released on a parole order. This involved investigating the role of the PRISM intervention in assisting offenders who have been released from prison for a terrorist-related offence or have demonstrated extremist views and associations.

Caution must be taken, as the PRISM intervention had only been operating since 2016, with there being a small – albeit increasing – caseload. Evaluating the impact of PRISM on disengagement and reintegration would need to take account of the length of time an offender has been engaged in the initiative, as well as the types of assistance provided. Data collection and analysis would need to provide opportunity for aggregation and track participants over time so that meaningful generalisations could be made. Such analysis has not been undertaken here and would require the collection of more data than what is drawn upon in this assessment. The data presented here only presents a snapshot in time.

The data on which this paper is based draws on interviews with various key informants, comprising a total of 55 respondents with snowball and purposive sampling adopted so as to capture a broad range of experiences and views. Contacts in CSNSW, the NSW Prison Chaplaincy, the NSW Ombudsman, state and federal police, state government and community-based organisations and leaders provided assistance in the recruitment of interviewees. This review of PRISM is informed by the views and experiences of 28 of the 55 respondents interviewed for the original project on the release of radicalised offenders. [Table 1](#) provides a breakdown of the interview sample drawn on in this paper. The six offenders were all Muslim, male and included two parolees and four individuals serving a period of incarceration for a terrorist-related offence. Five of the six offenders had engaged in the PRISM intervention. These interviews with offenders were all completed face-to-face. Interviews occurred between March and August 2017. On all occasions informed and signed consent was obtained from interviewees.

Firstly, written summaries of the interview transcripts were completed by a research assistant to capture the main topics canvassed across each interviewee. These summaries were checked by the author to ensure they captured enough detail covered by the interview schedule. These summaries helped to identify themes and informed the development of the coding scheme. Data was coded using the qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo. This involved the process of thematic coding in which transcribed interview data was systematically coded into a range of broad categories and then divided into subcategories. Coding was completed by a research assistant and the author to increase consistency, which involved a process of achieving consensus when it came to the inclusion and application of particular codes. However no statistical test for inter-coder reliability was undertaken, which raises the possibility of researcher bias. However the data reported here represents the most consistent and comparable results found across the interview sample. The author has endeavoured to only include particular themes in the analysis based on the fact they emerged as common recurrent topics across the interviews. Also particular examples, topics or issues were verified across two or more interviewees so as to cross-check their validity. This threshold was set because of the small

Table 1. PRISM Interview sample.

Role/position description	No. of interviewees
Community Corrections personnel (includes supervising officers & managers)	16
Correctional Intelligence Group	1
PRISM psychologists	2
Prison Chaplain (Muslim)	2
Offenders	6
Family member	1

sample size and since particular interviewees (e.g. PRISM staff and offenders) had intimate knowledge of certain issues that other respondents often lacked. One example includes motivations for consenting to participate in the intervention, which could only be accurately gauged by talking to clients. These various data verification strategies have been identified as helping to establish reliability and validity in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). However bias is always a risk in research that relies on knowledgeable informants, like programme staff and clients (Agar, 2008; Johnson, 1990). The numerical code (e.g. 001, 015, 038) that appears in particular paragraphs or at the end of a quote is the unique numerical identifier for each interviewee.

Findings

Engaging the extremist cohort and content of intervention plans

As mentioned above, PRISM is a voluntary programme. The process of gaining consent can be time consuming given that many offenders are suspicious about the aims of the intervention and can initially be distrustful of PRISM staff, which is compounded by the general distrust of institutional authorities amongst the extremist cohort (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Weggemans & de Graaf, 2017). The Muslim Prison Chaplains often assist in recruiting participants and can help to explain the benefits of the intervention to sceptical offenders; however, it was reported they too can be regarded with suspicion by offenders who see them as having been co-opted by government. Hence, the process of gaining consent is challenging with offenders suspicious of why they are being approached, so often they do not decide immediately to be involved – this usually takes a number of visits to give them an opportunity to think about whether they should participate. For offenders, some of the key concerns of participating in PRISM revolved around such issues as how it would impact on any future decision about their release, if anything said during a PRISM session would be used against them in the future, and if family members would know about their involvement. For example, two inmates who were interviewed (one who was engaged in PRISM and another who was not) expressed a fear that opinions expressed to PRISM staff could be used against them to deny parole or prevent them from transitioning through the prison system (i.e. moving from maximum security to medium and minimum security, and finally to work release). For offenders who have not been charged for a terrorist offence but were approached to participate in PRISM due to being identified as at risk of radicalisation, a concern expressed was whether their involvement would be seen as an admission that they are a violent extremist or a potential terrorist.

Hence, PRISM staff explained that a lot of effort needed to be invested in winning the trust and confidence of offenders, with development of the necessary therapeutic relationship with a participant taking time. For example, one PRISM staff member commented:

But it's engaging them and showing them that you're more than just another government employee and that you can share some of the language of the ideology and that you can share some insight in terms of where they're coming from – that's the big difference with these guys ... But that initial period of consent, rapport, engagement is incredibly unique to an extremist demographic and incredibly more challenging than – in my experience – any other offender cohort by a country mile ... However, once that trust and good working relationship has been established, there is little difference in the interventions and skills

required, et cetera compared with working with non-extremist offendersOnce you get over that hurdle, very workable. Very, very workable ... Very engaged (023)

The above observation accords with other research that has examined efforts to work with terrorist offenders and promote their reintegration (Marsden, 2017; Weggemans & de Graaf, 2017). For example, Marsden (2017) observes that an important practice of nurturing positive relationships with extremist offenders is for probation officers⁶ to develop trusting, open and transparent relations, which can help to facilitate desistance from extremism.

Interviews with PRISM staff indicate that treatment plans can target a range of needs – e.g. identity conflict, moderating religious views, avoiding extremist associations, encouraging positive family engagement, providing religious mentoring, preparation to help secure work when released, and tackling drug use or mental health issues. Psychological services, community/family engagement and religious support/education can be components of an intervention plan. When engaging offenders, the PRISM psychologists draw on motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioural therapy techniques while working with offenders on different aspects of their intervention plans. For example, one intervention plan for a PRISM client convicted of terrorism offences began with a focus on his theological and ideological needs related to Islamic extremism and aligning him with moderate interpretations of religious texts. This was assisted through the work of the Muslim chaplain. Psychological work with the offender involved addressing his sense of identity and facilitating more confidence in his sense of self. Addressing his social situation revolved around engaging the offender's wife and extended family, as well as helping to rebuild these social connections. In this instance the offender's wife was referred by PRISM staff to a local charity for financial assistance. Over time though the intervention plan shifted more towards reintegration needs, such as identifying work opportunities and employment pathways when he was to be released on parole.

The observation that the PRISM intervention has been engaging two distinct Muslim cohorts was made by a number of respondents. One is an older group who has been in custody for a significant period of time (over ten years for some) and tend to be more Al-Qaeda aligned; some of whom have had formal ties to paramilitary training and are described as having been strongly motivated by their ideological beliefs, knowledgeable about Islam (in some cases these clients make reference to their religious authority), with them challenging to engage and understand due to the variety of social and psychological processes that influence their thinking and behaviour. The other group was described as 'the Islamic state cohort': young (late 20s) and impulsive, and some of whom have very little understanding of their religion and may have a history of criminality, drug use and mental health problems. For this group their intervention plans often needed to focus on resolving conflict around their sense of identity, which can be pronounced for this younger cohort. As one PRISM staff member stated: 'His background – he struggled with an identity issue growing up, [in reference to a young offender participating in PRISM], which we are seeing in a lot of them [in reference to other young participants], this trans-cultural identity; am I Muslim, am I Australian, am I Lebanese, am I Afghani?' (022). This practical experience accords with arguments in the literature that a sense of identity influences pathways into and away from violent extremism (Cherney & Murphy, 2017; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Koehler, 2017; Marsden, 2017; Moghaddam, 2005). This

variation in the PRISM cohort between Al-Qaeda and IS aligned individuals also connects to a number of observations made in the literature. One being that the IS brand has a strong focus on promoting camaraderie and group identity which appeals to young Muslims largely ignorant of their religion,⁷ compared to Al-Qaeda that portrays itself as a more ideologically mature and religiously authoritative group in comparison (Hamming, 2017; Hassan, 2014; Juergensmeyer, 2018; Kimmel, 2018). The implication is that potentially interventions need to differentiate responses that tackle the motivations for individuals aligning with either group.

Motivations for participating

Understanding the motivations for why offenders decided to participate in the PRISM intervention can help to identify the benefits it provides and the types of outcomes it achieves. This is an issue that has not been explored in the literature as to what might motivate radicalised offenders or convicted terrorists to participate in an intervention that aims to disengage or de-radicalise them, given in some cases a person's radicalisation and extremism may give them the sense of identity they may feel they otherwise lack. One obvious conclusion would be that it is motivated through self-interest to secure release. However, PRISM staff make it clear to offenders that consenting to participate may not have an influence on any decision to release them.

Two parolees who were interviewed had participated in the PRISM intervention during their time in custody and were still being engaged by PRISM staff. When asked why they decided to participate in the intervention, the motivations evident were the desire to prove they were not radicalised, and/or to challenge the extremist label and show they were moving away from certain beliefs and problematic associations. For example, one parolee stated the following when asked what motivated his participation:

The only thing I wanted to gain was to show them that I'm not that person they think I am ... Like they obviously have – they had me under surveillance for being [recognised] in jail, just because of the circle I was in. The only reason why I done it is just to show them I have nothing to do with these people, and [and to show] I went far away from these people ... They look at me that all right, his associates are all extreme, he must be extreme. So, I did the programme just to show them that all right, my associates were extreme. I never spoke to them about religion, I'm not extreme myself. The second you told me that the people are extreme, I disassociated myself from them. Just to show them that I'm not like that either. That's one of the main reasons why I did it ... (044)

Another recalled:

Well, they wanted me to do the PRISM programme because [of] my associates were considered high risk and - well, you can say like - I don't know how to explain it ... like, extreme. Like, my associates I was hanging out with at that time [when he committed his offence]. Then they came and approached me and I said listen, I've got nothing to hide, I'm not like them ... and I said I'll do the programme just to show you ... So, people don't define who I am straight away ... You know what I mean? Because the way they look at me [as at risk] is not the way I actually am (045).

Similar sentiments were expressed by inmates in custody serving an offence for terrorism, and who were also participating in the PRISM intervention. For example, one inmate stated he consented to show: 'I have nothing to hide' (052), with this inmate describing how it

gave him the opportunity to more clearly articulate his religious beliefs (e.g. about jihad) and show he was not a threat or extremist.

The above two parolee cases highlight interesting issues around intervening with people identified as at risk of radicalisation. One is that PRISM is not labelled as a de-radicalisation intervention by programme staff, with it described to inmates as concerned with disengagement and reintegration. However, some inmates are aware of its underlying focus with the extremist/terrorist label seen as creating assumptions around the risks they present, which in the mind of these offenders are not seen as accurate or warranted. The flip side from a programmatic point of view, however, is that it may potentially have the beneficial outcome of making it easier for professional staff to engage offenders in interventions like PRISM as a result of the motivation among inmates to disprove the terrorist/extremist label.

Some might argue that the above-stated reasons provided by inmates as to why they participated in the PRISM intervention are not a true reflection of their underlying motivation; rather, observers might argue the motivation to participate is driven more by self-interest, for example to receive additional privileges when in custody or to help them secure parole. This does not mean that in such cases PRISM cannot facilitate disengagement or self-reflection on the part of an offender.

Self-reported benefits of participation

The reported motivations to participate in PRISM cited above highlight some of the benefits accrued to participants, such as the opportunity to voice their religious beliefs. This potentially creates a cognitive opening for members of the PRISM team to challenge these beliefs and promote critical thinking among participants. Promoting critical thinking (i.e. strengthening cognitive skills that encourage the questioning of information and the recognition of complexity and ambiguity) is seen as important in promoting desistance from extremism (Koehler, 2017; Marsden, 2017).

Parolees and inmates did state that involvement in the PRISM intervention provided (and facilitated) the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs about Islam and also the factors that led to their offending behaviours or involvement with extremist associates. For example, one inmate stated that participation in PRISM had challenged his past beliefs and caused him to reflect more on his motivations to commit an act of terrorism. The issue of tackling religious ideology is canvassed in the next section.

Another inmate stated that he had initially refused to participate in PRISM when approached, regarding it as unnecessary. However, when the programme was explained to him he saw it as offering an opportunity for self-reflection and a means by which to ensure he did not return to prison. At the time of the interview this inmate had completed six sessions with the PRISM psychologist. This inmate stated that sessions with the PRISM psychologist helped him to reflect on his childhood, involvement in petty crime, the pathway to radicalisation and why he began to associate with extremist peers (some of whom were also in custody for terrorist-related offences). For example this inmate stated: 'when PRISM was explained to me I saw it offering an opportunity for self-reflection ... one session on my childhood ... I went back to my cell and realised how shit my childhood was' (050).

One parolee recalled that participating in PRISM involved discussions with the Muslim Chaplain on the Islamic religion, which was judged as informative. This interviewee reflected that PRISM helped him to resist and avoid extremist associations when in prison and challenge prisoners that sought to radicalise other inmates. He stated such skills and insights were also of assistance when released into the community:

... the chaplain ... he used to give me a lot of good lessons to - how to - if someone told you something and blah, blah, blah. It's like, no, no, no, this is the way. You know what I mean? ... Because ... There's a lot of vulnerable young men in there [in reference to prison], and they go inside and they find these people [in reference to other inmates that try to recruit and radicalise other inmates], and don't get me wrong; at the start, they're very nice to you. They're very humble, and they show you love, care, but it's all fake ... it's all fake. It's like nothing they say is the truth. Before PRISM I've seen it myself, but like I said, before PRISM I would never talk to anyone about this. I would never say they were fake. I would never say they were - PRISM made me feel like I have people that would stand by me, calling these people fake and ... You know what? [it gave me] skill - yeah, skill. They give you the skill to lead your own journey. Yeah, and know what's wrong and how to deal with it ... In the community, it's actually more easy just to avoid these people. It's much easier to stay away and just enjoy life. They show you [in reference to PRISM staff] - I've learned you don't need to, you don't need these people in your life (045).

The above experience indicates that interventions like PRISM have the potential to help radicalised offenders break away from extremist associates and networks, and to provide the skills to resist and even challenge their influence on themselves and others. This is particularly important because, online and offline, social networks and particular individuals within those networks (e.g. charismatic leaders) have been shown to play key roles in the radicalisation process, helping to reinforce personal grievances and ideology, and providing the intent and capability to commit acts of terrorism (Harris-Hogan, 2013; Hofmann & Dawson, 2014; Sageman, 2011).

Tackling ideology

As highlighted in the literature review, counter-narratives and religious education can form a component of some CVE programmes, particularly those based in prison focusing on Islamic extremism (e.g. see Boucek, 2008). However, amongst front-line staff delivering CVE programmes, there can be uncertainty about how best to tackle ideologies amongst some extremist offenders, particularly those that are of a Muslim background (Koehler, 2017; Weggemans & de Graaf, 2017). Progressing knowledge in this area requires capturing the types of approaches that are used to address ideological beliefs and consideration of the controversies surrounding the adoption of such tactics. In this regard, understanding how CVE programme staff tackle ideological beliefs is important.

As indicated above, PRISM intervention plans can focus on a range of needs. The aim is to achieve both a change in behaviour and attitudes. Tackling the ideological convictions held by radicalised Muslim offenders can form a component of these intervention plans. One way this is achieved through the PRISM intervention is via promoting critical thinking and a more pluralistic understanding of Islam. A Chaplain involved in the PRISM intervention described this process in the following way:

That's the first thing with PRISM ... I make them learn about schools of thought and I encourage them to take a school of thought. What they'll say to you is just take the strongest

opinion, which is the whole Salafi mentality. It's like yeah, okay that's all right for your own personal stuff but what if you start dealing with issues that go beyond your personal space? Now you're dealing with other – it's going to affect others. If you get that wrong, then that's a major sin on you ... [I say to inmates]. Why we have schools of thought is to make life easy for you so you don't have to learn the strongest opinion. You just learn one but you can move outside of that ... What that does, when you have a school of thought – the first thing it does is it makes you understand because Islam is pluralistic. Amongst these four different schools or new schools there are actually – even amongst the schools themselves there's great variance of opinion on some issues. Also, the three of them might agree and one will disagree, but guess what? That opinion's still valid. You straightaway teach them that there's shades of grey, that there's plurality, that it can be something different to you, but it's still valid. You broaden their horizon and that's what it's about (036).

It could be questioned whether the tactic described above actually works, particularly for Muslim extremist offenders who have an in-depth understanding of the Islamic religion, and who may question the legitimacy of deviating from particular schools of thought. For other inmates who are not as well-informed or schooled in the Islamic religion it may have more traction. Understanding this variation in impact is important to the evaluation of CVE programmes, particularly when tackling religious or ideological motivations is emphasised as a component. However, the above experience and tacit knowledge adopted by the Muslim chaplain does accord with recent theory and research on radicalisation involving what has been defined as a process of de-pluralisation (Koehler, 2017). The practical outcome of this argument is that practices aimed at promoting disengagement should aim to foster alternative viewpoints and solutions, and ultimately lead to their acceptance, or what Koehler (2017) terms 're-pluralisation'. This closely resembles notions around critical thinking as encompassing the capacity to question and interpret varying (sometime conflicting) perspectives (Bowell & Kemp, 2005; Marsden, 2017).

An important question for the evaluation of interventions such as PRISM is, what does disengagement from extremist beliefs actually look like and what are the expectations placed on offenders to recant and moderate certain views? The expectation that offenders need to renounce their commitment to certain religious beliefs to prove they are no longer radicalised may be unrealistic and also counterproductive. The latter point is particularly relevant to Muslim offenders given the role Islam plays in their spiritual needs and daily routines. For example, one inmate participating in PRISM stated that in relation to his progression through the intervention he should not be forced to abandon certain beliefs to prove he is no longer radicalised. This offender used the concept of jihad⁸ as an example, stating: 'I can't say I no longer believe in jihad because it is of such importance to Muslims' (052). This inmate then went on to describe how there were different types of jihad (i.e. individual spiritual struggles as well as militarised forms), arguing that just because he believes in jihad it does not mean he is going to do something violent. The expectation that offenders need to moderate their commitment to particular Islamic principles may make it harder to engage them in an open and sincere manner. This may have implications for whether programmes like PRISM are effective in facilitating disengagement.

Community corrections footprint

One of the aims of the PRISM intervention is to help prepare extremist offenders for release into the community. Given its relationship to reintegration, in-custody programmes like

PRISM need to be linked with the community corrections context (i.e. with probation and parole), particularly when the experience derived from such interventions can help to inform the ways radicalised offenders are case managed when released into the community. Weggemans and de Graaf (2017) argue that there can be knowledge gaps amongst professionals responsible for supervising extremist offenders as to how best to deal with this cohort. Programmes such as PRISM can act as a resource to help fill these knowledge deficits.

When an offender who has participated in PRISM is released on parole, a handover process occurs with the relevant community corrections office, and in some cases PRISM staff will continue to engage the offender during their parole period. However, given PRISM is an in-custody pilot intervention its extension to the community corrections context still requires further formulation and additional resourcing.

However, both PRISM staff and Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) reported that PRISM's extension to the community corrections context would have considerable benefits. This included ensuring some continuity in the handover process, with these interviewees stating that maintaining contact with PRISM staff would ensure that benefits of the programme could be maintained and assist in the offender's adjustment to life in the community. Furthermore, the point was made that exit planning and through-care for terrorist offenders cannot just end when they exit custody, and that the involvement of PRISM staff would help in the continuity of these processes when offenders are released. Two CCOs involved in supervising a parolee charged for a terrorist offence stated that the information provided by the PRISM team had helped to inform aspects of the offender's case management plan. One parolee stated that efforts by a PRISM staff member to engage the community corrections office he was to be released to had, in his opinion, helped allay concerns staff may have had about the risks he presented, given his past extremist links.

PRISM staff also made the observations that with the increasing awareness of the PRISM intervention across CSNSW, the PRISM team were now receiving an increasing number of enquiries from community corrections staff. This included enquires relating to the formulation of pre-release reports, whether individuals on parole can be referred to the intervention, or information on whether certain behaviours (e.g. converting to Islam) are associated with radicalisation.

Additional operational challenges

Some of the challenges that have been confronted in the early implementation of the PRISM intervention have been highlighted. Here additional challenges and issues are summarised.

Resisting the blurring of the intervention with intelligence collection

Given PRISM staff spend a significant amount of time with clients, they inevitably collect a lot of information about an offender's beliefs and past behaviour, which was recognised as having potential value to police and intelligence agencies. However, it was emphasised that there needed to be clear separation between the PRISM intervention, law enforcement, security and intelligence. Any blurring was seen as risking the integrity and

effectiveness of the programme and would make obtaining consent all the more difficult. It was emphasised that this separation needs to be clearly explained to various stakeholders and external agencies (e.g. police) as well as offenders.

Custodial environment

In NSW, the High Risk Management Correctional Centre (HRMCC) known as ‘Supermax’ is where ‘AA’ classified high-risk terrorist inmates are housed (Maley, 2017). Inmates in the HRMCC are subject to a Behavioural Management Program, which links behaviour modification to a hierarchy of sanctions and earned privileges. Inmates are kept in separate cells and limitations are imposed on who they can associate with at any given time. Visitors approved by the Commissioner for Corrections can only visit inmates, with visits and phone calls by family and friends monitored and recorded. Phone calls are limited to approved phone numbers and persons contactable (e.g. a lawyer or family member). Depending on an offender’s security designation, visits can entail either contact visits or what is referred to as box visits, where the inmate is physically separated from visitors. Inmates are subject to lockdowns where they can be confined to their cell for anywhere between 18 and 24 hours. This environment was identified as creating challenges in developing the necessary therapeutic relationship with clients incarcerated in the HRMCC. The regime imposed on AA classified inmates surrounding the short periods they are let out of their cells was also regarded as limiting the length of time PRISM staff can spend with clients in the centre.

Family engagement

Engaging family members is a key component of the PRISM intervention, as it is recognised that they are important to the offender’s reintegration when released from prison. However, this was identified as a challenging and demanding task, because family members (e.g. spouses or children) can be dealing with their own psychological struggles, such as coping with the fact that their son, husband or father is incarcerated and dealing with their transition out of custody. Engagement often involved referring family members to external community-based service providers where necessary. The challenges family members face in dealing with the incarceration and reintegration of their extremist son or daughter has been noted in other studies (Weggemans & de Graaf, 2017).

Discussion and conclusion

The Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) is a pilot intervention delivered by Corrective Services NSW aimed at prison inmates who have a conviction for terrorism or have been identified as at risk of radicalisation due to specific behaviours and/or links with known extremists. The preliminary evidence reported here outlines a number of implementation challenges confronted by the PRISM initiative, provides insight into various outcomes, as well as highlighting a range of lessons for the evaluation of such interventions.

Recruiting participants into such an intervention will always be challenging given the nature of the cohort the PRISM team engages. Intervention plans address a range of

needs (psychological, social and ideological), some of which are not all that dissimilar to other 'regular' offending cohorts (e.g. encouraging positive family connections) (see also Weggemans & de Graaf, 2017).

Based on the evidence presented here, PRISM achieves some beneficial outcomes. It would appear that the motivations to participate in PRISM offer the opportunity for offenders to initiate change and actively demonstrate that they do not present an ongoing risk of radicalising to violent extremism. This requires active signalling on the part of the offender (e.g. verbal self-reflection about what motivated them to commit an act of terrorism), which then allows the PRISM team to consolidate and build on these motivations and changes in self-perceptions. PRISM clients did report a range of benefits due to participating in the intervention. This included helping them to gain insights into their radicalisation, as well as assisting offenders to cope with their time in custody and preparing for release. Where necessary tackling the ideological component of radicalisation and violent extremism does form part of a PRISM intervention plan. For Muslim clients this aims to promote a plural and more in-depth understanding of Islam. Promoting disengagement, therefore, requires efforts to shift the ways in which Muslim offenders think about and engage with their religion. However, this does not mean that Muslim participants have to abandon some of their key religious beliefs.

There are limitations with this study. Firstly, the data is derived from a small sample, and hence this can bias the data. Other forms of data that may provide evidence as to whether participants have truly disengaged were not accessed e.g. data on institutional behaviour. The interview data reflects an inherently subjective and personal experience, which can raise questions about its accuracy. The accounts provided by interviewees reflect their grounded perspectives and therefore do provide practical insights into the early implementation of the PRISM intervention and the types of benefits accrued for programme participants. The responses of offenders should be understood as demonstrating efforts to express their experiences of engaging in the PRISM intervention and how it changes their self-perceptions. The broader literature on offender reintegration illustrates that such changes in self-perceptions are an important first step in promoting desistance (Giordano, 2014; Maruna, 2001), which has been argued as relevant to the disengagement of individuals who have radicalised to violent extremism (Marsden, 2017).

Evaluating an initiative like PRISM will always be challenging, given its relatively small caseload, which is the result of the fact that the PRISM cohort comprises a small percentage of the overall prison population in NSW. Hence utilising some types of evaluation methods for such interventions, such as randomised control trials (RCTs) can be impractical. Further, there can be security – and/or ethical-related concerns about using RCTs with convicted terrorists (e.g. having individuals on a wait list to serve as a control group). Additionally, offenders will have participated in PRISM over varying periods of time and the intensity of this engagement will also differ. Hence, no one intervention plan will necessarily be alike. This can make it difficult, therefore, to untangle the relative influence of different components of the intervention on an offender's disengagement. Another challenge is identifying a meaningful and valid measure of disengagement, which will have an impact on whether one can conclude the risk of committing any future acts of extremism has been reduced. These challenges can be partly addressed through tracking participation and progress longitudinally. The evidence presented in this paper on PRISM's early operation does indicate that it shows promise in achieving

its aims. As the intervention becomes embedded over time, more evidence will be available as to its effectiveness. It is these long-term evaluations that should be attempted, given desistance from extremism is a continuing iterative process (Marsden, 2017), which requires an extended follow-up period. While the absence of primary source studies on CVE programmes is a problem, the absence of longitudinal studies also proves problematic. The evidence provided here on the PRISM intervention goes some way towards helping to fill the gap in existing studies on CVE interventions and highlights the complexities surrounding their delivery and evaluation.

Notes

1. Australia is divided into six states comprising New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia, and two Territories, which are the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.
2. Classification AA refers to the category of inmates who, in the opinion of the NSW Commissioner for corrections, represent a special risk to national security (for example, because of a perceived risk that they may engage in, or incite other persons to engage in, terrorist activities) and should at all times be confined in special facilities within a secure physical barrier that includes towers or electronic surveillance equipment (see Corrective Services NSW Offender Classification & Case Management Policy & Procedures Manual 12.3 Category AA and Category 5 Inmates, V 1.5 March 2015, p. 4).
3. Services and Programs Officers work with offenders in custody to identify relevant services and programmes.
4. The Correctional Intelligence Group (CIG) gathers, coordinates, analyses and disseminates intelligence throughout the custodial and community-based correctional system in NSW.
5. Some of these inmates will have not committed a terrorist-related offence.
6. Marsden's (2017) study was based in the U.K. where community supervision is termed 'probation'.
7. This is not to deny the influence and use of religious arguments presented by ISIS to justify their actions and recruit members.
8. *Jihad* literally means striving or exerting oneself. Its meaning and legitimate expression is derived from multiple sources: e.g. the Qur'an (the word of god revealed to the Prophet Muhammed), Sunnah (sayings and actions of the Prophet), Hadith (oral traditions attributed to the Prophet) and Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), to name a few. Broadly, jihad can be described as possessing two meanings: the violent and non-violent. The militarised violent variant of jihad has been celebrated by extremist groups such as ISIS.

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