Countering Violent Extremism in Prisons: A Review of Key Recent Research and Critical Research Gaps

by Andrew Silke and Tinka Veldhuis

Abstract

Over the past decade, government policy has repeatedly identified prisons as particularly important environments in terms of both the risks of radicalisation and of opportunities for de-radicalisation. This paper provides an overview of some of the most important research findings that have emerged on prison and violent extremism in recent years. Drawing on this research, the article synthesises and assesses the dominating themes and views in the literature. The paper also identifies a number of significant knowledge gaps that deserve further scholarly attention.

Keywords: prison, prisoners, detention, radicalisation, de-radicalisation

Introduction

In recent years, the role of prisons in countering violent extremism has received increasing scholarly and political priority. [1] With prisons often being portrayed and widely viewed as 'hotbeds' of radicalisation, researchers have devoted growing attention to examining the challenges and opportunities that arise with the presence of violent extremist offenders within prison systems. The literature in this area now covers a broad range of issues. Whereas the first publications focused mainly on understanding the risks and dynamics behind prisoner radicalisation[2], more recently authors have started focusing on more technical challenges, such as risk assessment and classification, management strategies, and rehabilitation and reintegration approaches. [3]

This paper aims to provide an overview of some of the most important findings that have emerged in the field in recent years. Given the vast amount of publications and the breadth of relevant issues, we highlight and synthesise some of the dominating themes and views in the literature. Finally, the paper also seeks to identify a number of important remaining knowledge gaps that deserve further scholarly attention.

Religion and Ideology in Prison

Traditionally, religion and ideology have played an important role in prison, and criminologists have long recognised that religious or ideological commitment can have substantial benefits for inmates.[4] Especially for first-offenders, imprisonment can be a disheartening experience. Adopting a belief system can help inmates adopt a new, more positive identity, give purpose and meaning to their prison experience, cope with feelings of guilt and shame, and gain a sense of control and self-significance while in prison.[5]

Scholars on prisoner radicalisation have likewise noted the positive effects of religious or ideological conversion for prisoners, and tend to agree that conversion among inmates is common but that radicalisation towards violent extremism, although potentially dangerous, is very rare. For instance, based on extensive research in the U.S., Mark Hamm concludes that prison conversions mostly "did more good than harm and sometimes even served a de-radicalisation agenda."[6] Similarly, in an in-depth study among inmates in a UK-based high-security prison, Liebling and colleagues note that religion can offer moral and social guidelines for inmates and help them make sense of their imprisonment.[7]

As such, although it is undisputed that violent extremism can create real and serious security concerns within the correctional system, most authors seem to agree that religion generally has a positive effect on inmates and that, in most prisons, radicalisation is a rare phenomenon.

Causes and dynamics of prisoner radicalisation

Arguably, the majority of publications in the field set out to identify the key contextual factors that appear to make inmates vulnerable to violent extremism. It is generally accepted that radicalisation primarily stems from a combination of institutional, social, and individual factors, such as overcrowding and deprivation, violence and group dynamics, and a desire for protection and belonging.[8] In particular, two factors appear to stand out in the discussion on what drives inmates towards violent extremist ideologies and groups: over-crowding and charismatic leadership.

Overcrowding is a common problem in many prisons around the world, and is often seen as one of the central causes behind inmate misconduct and recidivism.[9] Overcrowding creates stress and induces inmates to flock together in subgroups, which compete over scarce resources and social status. Especially in prisons with high levels of disorder and violence, inmates may be inclined or even forced to join a group for protection or access to otherwise unattainable goods. Under such conditions, inmates may become susceptible to the influence of violent extremist groups or ideologies, which may offer social and moral support to deal with the ordeals of imprisonment.

Overcrowded, chaotic, and under-resourced prisons in turn pave the way for charismatic extremist leaders to organise social groups and impose extremist belief systems upon their followers. The role of charismatic leaders is emphasised in the majority of recent publications on prisoner radicalisation. Hamm, in particular, stresses how charismatic leaders select vulnerable inmates and use one-on-one proselytization to recruit groups of followers.[10] Liebling and colleagues describe a similar dynamic in the UK, where charismatic Muslim "key-players" target search for 'lost' inmates and offer themselves as trustworthy guides, propagating Islam as a means to find an identity and meaning in life.[11]

One problem, however, with the discussion around the causes of radicalisation within prison is that the evidence base has tended to be anecdotal. Current theories on prison radicalisation are almost entirely based on an analysis of a small number of case studies of radicalisation within prison, combined with a theoretical assessment of likely drivers which draws primarily on the wider literature on radicalisation and also frequently on the literature around prison gangs.[12]

Some much older research has explored how prison can act as an environment for increasing the politicisation of terrorist prisoners. For example, Colin Crawford's interview survey of 70 paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland found that imprisonment increased their level of political awareness (e.g. "we hadn't a clue about republicanism"). What is particularly interesting is that Crawford also found that this increasing political awareness led most of the prisoners (70%) to eventually believe that a political settlement to the conflict was the only logical solution (rather than continued violence).[13] In this respect then, the prison experience was associated with elements of de-radicalisation rather than increased radicalisation.

More recent research has illustrated that prison can also be associated with increased radicalisation among terrorist prisoners. In a study focused on detained terrorist suspects in the Philippines, Arie Kruglanski and his collaborators were able to survey 29 prisoners suspected of membership of the Abu Sayyaf group, and carried out a follow-up survey two years later with the same prisoners.[14] The study found that radicalisation increased among the prisoners over the two year period, with the prisoners on average scoring higher across three different measures of radicalisation ('Islamic Extremism', 'Support for Violence' and 'Negative Attitudes to the West'). Significantly, the effects were strongest for younger prisoners, unmarried prisoners, and prisoners without children. Perhaps unexpectedly, their attitudes to their prison experience or to prison guards showed no link with increased radicalisation. Prisoners with more negative attitudes were not more likely to become increasingly radicalised. The research also found that prisoners with a high need for cognitive closure were less likely to radicalise than those with a low need. The research team drew attention to the context in which the prisoners were held: the prisoners were all held together in the same compound where they and many other suspected Abu Sayyaf members (including senior figures) had unlimited social interaction.

Management and Allocation of Violent Extremist Offenders Within the Prison System

When it comes to appropriate management and allocation strategies for violent extremist prisoners, a question that frequently arises is whether radicalised inmates can best be integrated into the mainstream inmate population, or whether they should be segregated in separate high-security facilities. Several countries, like the USA, Australia, and the Netherlands have opted for concentration policies, whereas others generally disperse violent extremist offenders across a small number of high-security facilities.[15] Others such as Spain operate a mixed policy, dispersing prisoners belonging to the Basque group ETA, but concentrating Jihadi terrorists.[16]

The UK is increasingly moving to a mixed approach. In Northern Ireland, paramilitary prisoners have always been concentrated. Before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement such prisoners were held in HMP The Maze. Following the closure of that prison as part of the peace process, paramilitary prisoners are now concentrated instead at HMP Maghaberry. In England and Wales, Jihadi prisoners have traditionally been spread among the small number of high security prisons. The Acheson review in 2016 concluded that "Islamist Extremism (IE) was a growing problem within prisons."[17] This view was not shared by the National Offender Management Service, at the time, which could highlight the low re-offending rate for former terrorist prisoners and the rarity of cases of individuals radicalised in prison in England and Wales who are subsequently convicted of terrorist offences. Nevertheless, the Acheson conclusions chimed with public perceptions and ultimately the government introduced one of the key recommendations: the creation of specialist "separation centres" to isolate terrorist prisoners from the rest of the prison population.[18] Three centres are being established, each located in a high security prison, and with a combined capacity for up to 28 prisoners. There are over 130 Jihadi-related prisoners in England and Wales, so most will still remain outside of the new segregation system.

The first of the centres was opened in July 2017, but researchers have already raised concerns. Drawing on interviews with former British Jihadi prisoners, Tam Hussein highlighted that the ability of terrorist prisoners to radicalise other prisoners in British jails was widely overestimated, and what was significantly underestimated was how exposure to other prisoners actually moderated the views of most extremist prisoners. As one interviewee reported:

I really think that in my time in prison most of the Mojo's [Muhajiroon] realised they had made errors from being in prison and actually being forced to mix for once. They couldn't isolate like they do on the outside… no one took Mojo Dawah [proselitisation] seriously, and they ended up all…becoming much more mainstream.[19]

John Horgan, arguably the leading international expert on terrorist disengagement and de-radicalisation, has been scathing in his assessment of the separation centres:

The idea of segregating radical prisoners from the rest of the prison population is a terrible idea. In an attempt to solve one problem it will create another, focusing and amplifying radicalization rather than curbing it…It reeks of a knee-jerk political response and just isn't very smart. Smart monitoring, supervision, program development, resourcing and staff training represent far better solutions.[20]

However, as yet, limited concrete evidence exists on the downsides and benefits of both strategies. Clearly, context is very important, but it is unclear which strategy may work best and under which circumstances.

On the one hand, housing violent extremist offenders together may be cost-efficient and minimise the risk of proselytization. However, Veldhuis evaluated the Dutch terrorism detention policy to concentrate terrorism offenders in specialised 'terrorism wings' and found that there was no substantial evidence that concentration was a necessary and helpful response to violent extremism.[21] Similarly, speaking in relation to the Australian policy for also separating terrorist prisoners Sofia Patel has warned that "the assumption that creating an exclusive wing for terrorist offenders will curb the spread of their ideology is inaccurate at best, and counterproductive at worst." Moreover, concentration policies can produce undesired side-effects, such as intensifica-

tion of extremist ideologies and networks. They can also enhance the prisoners' ability to plan and orchestrate activities both within the prison and with elements beyond the prison walls. Northern Ireland, for example, provides many such examples including mass escapes, riots, weapon smuggling, co-ordinated hunger strikes, the intimidation and assassination of prison staff, and sophisticated campaigns of political protest. [22].

On the other hand, in their study in the Philippines, Jones and Morales found that integrating terrorists into a gang-dominated prison culture may (temporarily) promote disengagement and encourage de-radicalisation.[23] Jones and Morales argue that, provided that inmate groups are constructively managed, integrating extremists into the general inmate population may create opportunities for positive reform. At the same time, however, integration may also increase the risk of recruitment and dispersion of violent extremist ideologies.

It is clear that what works in one country may not work in the next, and the preferred strategy is likely to depend on a range of contextual factors, such as background and size of the inmate population, available resources and staff, levels of violence and gang activity, and inmate culture. Individual characteristics can also be a factor. For example, charismatic, high profile prisoners, such as the Islamist ideologue Anjem Choudary who was jailed in the UK in 2016, could pose a special challenge for the prison authorities, likely presenting a greater potential risk of 'contagion' of ideology compared to someone less charismatic. It is perhaps no surprise then that Choudary was one of the first prisoners transferred to the newly opened segregation centres. [24]

Effectiveness of De-radicalisation Programs in Prison

One of the most serious questions in this area relates to the effectiveness of prison-based programs which are designed to intervene with terrorist prisoners and to either de-radicalise and/or disengage them from violent extremism. This issue has attracted considerable (and growing) attention but good evidence about what works in this area remains scarce.[25] Most of the published studies to date have either been descriptive or theoretical.[26] These can provide useful insight into different approaches but are of very limited use in terms of determining, empirically, what impact the programs have.

Two recent studies, however, have shed important light on this area, and both are distinctive in that the research involved direct access to terrorist prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Zora Sukabdi's (2015) study was carried out in Indonesia and involved interviews and focus groups with 43 male prisoners and ex-prisoners most of whom had belonged to Jama'a Islamiya (JI) or an affiliate organisation.[27] The sample included a spread of membership ranging from low ranking individuals to senior leadership. At the time of the interviews and focus groups all of the men were identified as having disengaged from supporting violence and illegal activity. A key focus from Sukabdi's research was to shed light on the disengagement and de-radicalisation experiences of the prisoners, and to also assess their views on what factors made prison-based de-radicalisation programs effective or not. While Indonesian authorities have tried a variety of approaches to de-radicalise terrorist prisoners, overall, the effectiveness of Indonesian efforts in this regard have been considered poor by most reviews.[28] De-radicalisation approaches in Indonesia have tended to focus on four elements: (1) isolating prisoners who are engaging in de-radicalisation programs from other terrorist prisoners; (2) providing practical incentives for prisoners to engage, including holding them in better conditions and by providing economic assistance for them and their families; (3) using former militants to debate with current prisoners the ideology, rationales and justifications for violence; and (4) running workshops to tackle issues such as anger management but also to develop practical skills for future employment and provide new social relationships outside the terrorist network.[29] Thus, Sukabdi's study offered some potentially useful insight in terms of what lessons might be taken away to inform future efforts both in Indonesia and elsewhere.

The study found that shock experiences in the prisoners' lives (e.g. the experience of being arrested; seeing family members and friends pursued and arrested by the authorities) was cited by a majority of prisoners as a trigger for behavioural transformation away from violence. Though Sukabdi did not highlight it, this finding very much echoes some of the key findings from Cusson and Pinsonneault's (1986) highly influential research

on desistance from general crime.[30] Cusson and Pinsonneault identified a series of stages through which the offender progressed before deciding to abandon criminal activity, with the first factor being a shock stage resulting from aversive experiences as a result of the criminal activity.

Also significant was the prisoners' awareness of an ideological change based on their understanding the contexts of *daar al harb* (state of war) and *daar as salam* (state of peace) and coming to see Indonesia as a country where war was inappropriate. 23% of the prisoners also highlighted meeting the victims of terrorist bombings as a transformative experience.

There was also some fascinating insight in terms of the prisoners' views of what was needed to make an effective rehabilitation programme. In terms of development needs at the start of the interventions, personal self-empowerment was flagged by almost all as a key issue. No doubt partly linked to this, the prisoners also had an overwhelming emphasis on developing vocational skills which would allow them to gain employment, develop their own businesses and be economically self-sufficient after release. Characteristics which were important with the staff running the programme were, first and foremost, a strong knowledge of Islam, followed then by an ability to work in a positive, genuine and respectful manner with the prisoners.

While Sukabdi's study gives a fascinating insight into the views of prisoners who have been the focus of de-radicalisation programs, a far larger study in Sri Lanka provides us with valuable data on the effectiveness of such programs. Kruglanski and colleagues focused on the experience of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) detainees.[31] After decades of conflict, the LTTE was comprehensively defeated in 2009 and approximately 12,000 LTTE members were captured. The Sri Lankan government introduced large-scale programs to rehabilitate these prisoners.[32] Key elements included:

Hard core members of the LTTE who remained highly committed to the cause were separated from the rest of the prisoner population, so that they were not able to actively try to undermine the rehabilitation programme.

The authorities did not refer to the LTTE members as "prisoners" or "detainees". Instead, they were referred to as "beneficiaries."[33] It was believed that this language had more positive connotations and would help foster better relations with staff, and creates a different and more positive self-image for the "beneficiaries" themselves.

Prisoners were encouraged to take part in a variety of activities designed to encourage individual development. This included taking part in yoga to develop spiritual insight, and artistic activities to facilitate individual expression. The emphasis on individual development in these programs, was designed to counteract the heavy collectivistic and group focus which dominated the prisoners' time in the LTTE.

Prisoners also took part in vocational programs, which were designed to develop skills that would help the prisoners to successfully reintegrate into society after their release. These programs included courses on construction, electronics and carpentry, as well as courses on cosmetics and the clothes industry specifically for female prisoners.

Kruglanski and colleagues carried out evaluations of the impact of the rehabilitation programme, and indeed, this evaluation is probably the most rigorous currently available.[34] The evaluation involved 1906 prisoners based across six different centres. Crucially, the researchers were able to compare this sample with a control sample of 152 LTTE prisoners at another institution who for logistical reasons were not able to be part of the rehabilitation programme.

The evaluation showed a significant drop in support for continued political violence among prisoners who experienced the rehabilitation programme compared to those who did not. Similarly, prisoners in the programme showed a significant increase in positive attitudes towards the staff running the centres. Overall, the evaluation showed a positive impact of the rehabilitation programme even among more hardcore individuals among the LTTE prisoners.

The rehabilitation programme overall was seen as very successful, and there were periodic mass releases of prisoners who had taken part in the programme. By the end of 2011, only about 1000 LTTE prisoners remained in detention, and by 2015 only about 100 of the original 12,000 still remained in prison.

Overall, the study provides clear evidence that rehabilitation programs can have a positive impact, and do result in significant differences compared to not running such programs for terrorist prisoners. The study does not allow us to pick apart the impact of different elements of the programme, but it provides an important milestone in evidence in this area. The extent to which the conclusion can be applied with confidence in other contexts while promising is unclear. For a start, one factor is that the LTTE had a nationalist/separatist motivation and wanted to establish a new country for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority in the north and east of the island. After decades of conflict, the LTTE was comprehensively defeated in 2009. Following this, the government maintained a very strong military presence in areas previously under LTTE control with a focus on preventing the re-emergence of pro-LTTE group. Thus, the prison programs took place in a context where the wider conflict had effectively ended, a context which almost certainly assisted rather than hindered the impact of the programs. There is also a question as to what extent ethno-nationalist motivations (versus for example religious motivations) affects the susceptibility of prisoners to interventions?

The Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders

In recent years, concerns over recidivism among violent extremist ex-prisoners and returned foreign fighters have spurred attention for rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders. Research on post-release and probation programs for ex-prisoners has been limited to date, though there has been a recent upsurge in interest.[35] Most of the recent papers however have been review studies which have highlighted some of the significant issues, but evaluative or impact assessments have been rare.

An exception is the study by Schuurman and Bakker, which provided an evaluation of a Dutch reintegration programme for detainees on probation or parole who were involved in jihadist extremism or terrorism, or individuals who were suspected of involvement in such activities and who were about to be released from detention.[36] All of the individuals targeted by the "project adhered to an extremist interpretation of Islam commonly designated as Salafi-Jihadism." Schuurman and Bakker evaluated the programme over a one-year period between 2013 and 2014, drawing primarily on a series of interviews with staff involved in running the programme.

The number of offenders on the programme was small at just five individuals, and overall, the study assessed the programme as having a mixed impact. While the general framework of the programme was judged to be theoretically sound, the most serious setback occurred when two of the five offenders managed to leave the Netherlands and travel to Syria to join Islamist militant groups (both were believed to later have been killed in combat). Of the remaining three offenders, staff judged that one had de-radicalised, one had disengaged but still held radical beliefs, and the third was assessed as probably not having been radicalised to begin with.

The evaluation also highlighted a variety of obstacles the programme faced in its operation, in particular, problematic relationships with key stakeholder partners such as the Public Prosecution Service and civil authorities; staff in support agencies lacked appropriate understanding or knowledge around extremist offenders; and, staff running the programme frequently reported a lack of line management support which added significantly to stress and workload levels.

Overall, while the evaluation was hardly a ringing endorsement for the work, Schuurman and Bakker nevertheless felt that many of the setbacks were the result of teething problems as the programme was being established, and they flagged a variety of areas where improvements were being noticed by the end of the evaluation period. The evaluation also flagged potential issues that should be considered when other reintegration and resettlement programs were being developed elsewhere. First, was the crucial importance of clear communication around the programme and of ensuring strong buy-in from key stakeholders. A second major issue was how to define and measure the success of such programs. Much attention in terms of judging success is focused on rates of recidivism, but Schuurman and Bakker argued that a 100% success rate was not

reasonable and that "with a process as complicated as the reintegration (violent) extremists, upsets are almost inevitable."

The Major Research Gaps

In general, authors tend to agree that although a vast amount of scholarly and policy attention has been paid to violent extremism in the correctional system, the amount and quality of empirical research into the matter is still insufficient.

In part, the lack of evidence may be caused by conceptual and methodological difficulties. Social phenomena such as radicalisation, recruitment, rehabilitation and reintegration are not only hard to conceptualise, they are equally hard to measure. In part, the problem is also that prisoners in general and violent extremist offenders, in particular, comprise a difficult research population. They are by definition isolated from society and not easily accessible for researchers, they may be reluctant to talk openly or may not be allowed or willing to be interviewed at all.[37] Consequently, there are still a number of issues that are underexplored and require further research:

There is little empirical scrutiny of the underlying social and psychological dynamics behind prisoner radicalisation. Several studies have set out to identify the factors that may be conducive to radicalisation, such as overcrowding, gang dynamics, and the presence of charismatic extremist leaders. Although useful, such accounts fail to explain why, when confronted with the same prison conditions, some people radicalise while others do not. In order to accurately identify those individuals at risk, empirical research is needed that aims to disentangle the social and psychological *mechanisms* by which contextual conditions may lead to radicalisation in some, but not in others.

Further work is also needed to understand disengagement from violence within prison. Though it is often overlooked a growing body of work illustrates that disengagement frequently occurs among imprisoned terrorists. Indeed, this may be norm for most terrorist prisoners even when prisoners are not exposed to or involved with de-radicalisation programs or other interventions.[38] The dynamics behind this need greater examination.

More research is required into the dynamics behind violent extremist inmate groups or gangs. It is often suggested that inmate groups play an important role in spreading violent extremist ideologies through prison; and more information is needed about the conditions under which extremist groups arise, how they recruit new members, and what their status position is within the broader inmate population. Moreover, as Jones and Morales suggested, inmate groups can play a positive role in maintaining order and structure within the inmate population.[39] As such, it is important to examine how prison staff can positively intervene in group dynamics.

There is a serious lack of good evaluative studies on prison and probation programs aimed at terrorist offenders. Most programs which have been developed appear not to be evaluated. Others receive partial evaluations which often tend to focus on process key performance indicators rather than impact. Often when evaluations have been carried out, the findings are not published or made available, making independent scrutiny and assessment of the evaluation or its conclusions exceptionally difficult. Inevitably this means that there is a serious lack of 'what works' evidence in this area. More impact assessments are badly needed.

There is little research into juvenile violent extremist offenders, and how (if at all) they should be treated differently from adult violent extremist offenders. Juveniles and teenagers make up a substantial proportion of the violent extremist offender population, yet many countries do not differentiate in their approaches toward adults and juvenile violent extremist offenders.

There is little knowledge about the challenges that violent extremists face when they are released from prison, and about the dynamics behind violent extremist recidivism. It is well known that ex-prisoners face a range of challenges upon their release, and it is likely that violent extremists face similar and maybe unique additional reintegration problems, such as stigmatisation and difficulties finding employment. Moreover, it

is imperative to examine in detail how conditions of confinement (e.g., concentration or integration, regime, security levels) impact post-release radicalisation and recidivism dynamics.

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