

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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An Examination of Risk Assessment Tools Developed for Radicalized Individuals and their Application in a Correctional Context***Extremism-specific risk assessment tools show promise, but require more empirical testing in a correctional setting.*****Why we did this study**

Radicalization to violence is a relatively rare, though high-impact event. Despite radicalized offenders comprising less than 1% of the Canadian federal offender population, research has demonstrated that they differ from the general offender population on a number of risk indicators and characteristics relevant for identification, intervention, and future risk determinations. Therefore, most researchers in the area of terrorism and violent extremism contend that general and violent risk assessment tools are not applicable to radicalized violent extremists. The use of extremism-specific risk assessments that are informed by the differing indicators and characteristics of violent extremists are being encouraged. The primary purpose of the current report is to consolidate the research to date regarding extremism-specific risk assessments.

What we did

The current report reviewed the literature to assess the reliability, validity, and the applicability of existing extremism-specific risk assessment tools within the Canadian correctional context. Further, indicators and risk factors for radicalization and violent extremism were identified.

What we found

In establishing risk factors, indicators, and characteristics associated with violent extremism, a number of research challenges have been identified. The small base rate of violent extremist behaviour has made it difficult to obtain samples large enough for statistical analyses. An accurate profile of violent extremism is difficult to establish as despite relations between terrorism and violent extremism, they are regarded as heterogeneous phenomena within the literature. Despite these issues, a number of broad internal and external characteristics have been identified for group radicalization and violent extremism (e.g., young age, well-educated, good employment history) and lone action (e.g., older age, mental health problems, past criminal history).

The most common and most researched risk assessment tools for extremism include the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA), Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG 22+), Multi-level Guidelines (MLG), and the Terrorist

Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18). While these tools are the most promising, most were not developed or intended for a correctional context.

Each risk assessment tool identified is unique and offers a slightly different lens through which to assess violent extremists. The available empirical evidence for extremism-specific risk assessment tools is limited and still relatively preliminary. Most of the tools have been developed and validated using publicly available information, such as case studies and samples of known terrorists. External independent reviews, increased adherence to reporting guidelines, and more research with offender samples will provide further confidence in the legitimacy of these assessments.

What it means

Overall, violent extremists make up a very small proportion of the Canadian offender population. The risk indicators identified within the literature and the risk assessments developed currently lack extensive empirical testing to provide definitive understandings and conclusions on radicalization and violent extremism, particularly within a correctional context.

While the existing tools are in their infancy, more empirical testing is required to validate their utility in order to deduce a much-needed level of specificity. Given these limitations, the available evidence precludes the ability to identify any tool as being superior to others for assessing violent extremism.

For more information

Conley, R. (2019). *Risk Assessment Tools Developed for Radicalized Individuals and their Application in a Correctional Context* (Research Report R-425). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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