Best Practices for Developing Resilient Communities and Addressing Violent Extremism

OVERVIEW

Lessons learned from the fields of mental health and education can uniquely contribute to best practices for developing resilient communities and addressing violent extremism.

WHAT IS COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CVE)?

CVE is "a realm of policy, programs, and interventions designed to prevent individuals from engaging in violence associated with radical political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and groups." CVE aims to address violent extremism in all its forms, regardless of ideology.

CHALLENGES OF CURRENT APPROACH TO CVE

CVE has run into significant resistance from some Muslim American communities. CVE grew out of the recognition that counterterrorism approaches were not adequate for preventing radicalization to violence and that community-based approaches were needed. Many community members are resistant to CVE due to past targeting, stigmatization, and stereotyping of Muslim American communities. Our experience in participatory research, a technique used in certain public health scenarios, suggests that part of the difficulty has been that community-based prevention and intervention of violent extremism does not adequately fit under a criminal justice framework, and CVE programming has been too narrowly tailored to violent extremism, when other issues are of equal or greater concern to communities. Furthermore, CVE initiatives have not yet adequately engaged mental health professionals and educators.

PROJECT GOALS AND KEY CONCLUSIONS

This study began with the recognition that CVE needs more than simply a name change and sought to build knowledge that could inform changes in policies and programs. The overall goals of this study were twofold:

1. Identify lessons learned from the mental health and education fields to inform ways of addressing violent extremism.
2. Delineate how professionals from the mental health and education fields could best become involved.

The key conclusion were:

1. A criminal justice framework is insufficient for addressing violent extremism.
2. Efforts to address violent extremism should enhance community resilience to all hazards.
3. Multidisciplinary approaches have the potential to significantly enhance efforts to address violent extremism.

Unlike a criminal justice approach, basing violence prevention efforts in mental health and education approaches offers significant promise in building community buy-in and participation, the necessary foundation for community-based initiatives.

METHOD

This project involved a review of education and mental health literature by a multidisciplinary team inclusive of education and mental health professionals (N=5). The search focused on English-language literature post-1985. An iterative consensus process was used to identify key concepts and best practices that could potentially contribute to the development of healthy, resilient communities and counter targeted violence.

Multiple relevant themes from education and mental health were identified and integrated into one overall framework. The results of the literature review were then presented and discussed at a two-day meeting, supported by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs and comprised of experts from education, mental health, law enforcement, federal agencies and Muslim communities (N = 25). This convening led to a revised framework, report, and other materials for dissemination.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS

PARTNERSHIP
ENSURE engagement efforts include a whole community approach
DEVELOP multidisciplinary teams that include mental health, education, religious, legal, and law enforcement expertise
EMBED activities within existing programs and organizations

RISK & THREAT ASSESSMENT
ACKNOWLEDGE that there is presently no basis in scientific knowledge for a quantitative risk assessment tool
UTILIZE a structured professional judgment approach to threat assessment
FRAME threat assessment as an access intervention that facilitates linkages to support and care

TREATMENT
ADOPT a highly flexible approach to devising the most appropriate support plan that best fits the needs of each person
INCLUDE possible roles for family therapy, individual psychotherapy, psychiatric medications, mentoring, life skills education, assistance with education and housing, as well as substance abuse treatment
ATTUNE treatments to developmental stages

COMMUNITY & FAMILY SUPPORT
WORK through community collaboration and seek community buy-in
ASSESS and address community needs and enhance community strengths
ENGAGE and empower community and family members of individuals of concern
PROVIDE educational support for families and peers

SOCIAL & STRUCTURAL FACTORS
ADDRESS structural factors and vulnerabilities
UTILIZE culturally responsive strategies and skills
PROMOTE culturally congruent programs
FOCUS on current and emerging threats that communities identify

PROGRAMS
USE multidimensional support packages with tiers of intervention
INVOLVE peers and former participants in intervention and prevention programs
FACILITATE access to mental health, education and law enforcement support services
FOLLOW-UP with individuals and hold regular team meetings

RESOURCES
DEVELOP protocols for interventions, inclusive of law enforcement

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
BUILD capacity of helping professionals, including teachers, mental health providers and religious leaders

ASSESSMENT
MONITOR AND ASSESS prevention and intervention efforts, including process and outcome

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