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# An Evidence-Informed Theory of Change for Facilitating Disengagement from Violent Extremism: Insights from the Community Integration Support Program

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***Abstract***

This paper addresses a persistent issue in the literature on countering violent extremism (CVE): the lack of robust program theory and an accepted analytical framework for understanding change mechanisms and measuring outcomes. The absence of a comprehensive theory of change in CVE programming can hinder conceptual clarity and practical understanding of the intervention philosophy, weakening the basis for intended outcomes and underlying mechanisms of change. The authors present an evidence-informed theory of change for the Community Integration Support Program (CISP), the longest-running CVE program in Australia. This mixed methods research, which combines quantitative analysis of detailed client assessments and 52 semi-structured interviews with clients and other key stakeholders, examines the main program ingredients that enable the CISP to achieve its intended outcome of client disengagement from terrorism and violent extremism. The results provide novel insights into the change mechanisms of CVE interventions that aim to support disengagement from terrorism and violent extremism, highlighting the need for programs to be holistic, tailored to individual needs, and delivered in a culturally appropriate way by trusted and skilled staff. The findings also indicate that most clients do not show substantive positive change until three or more years in the program. The authors encourage CVE interventions to move beyond ill-defined or generic theories of change to ones that are evidence-based and context-specific.

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## Introduction

A consistent critique in the literature on countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions is the pressing need to apply robust program theory and analytical frameworks for

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understanding change mechanisms and measuring outcomes (Malet, 2021; Brett, 2023). A recent systematic review found that "very few studies described or formulated a theory of change and logic model to understand the processes underlying a program's positive and negative outcomes" (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022, p. 147). The absence of a comprehensive theory of change in CVE programming "may obscure critical understandings concerning the intervention logic and weaken the basis for expected results" (Brett, 2023, p. 447). A robust theory of change can help CVE practitioners and policymakers to prioritize resources, better evaluate the performance of CVE programs and policies, identify suitable methodologies and impact measures, more effectively monitor progress and performance, and incorporate learning from this monitoring into program management (Brett, 2023; Koehler, 2024). For these reasons, incorporating a theory of change during the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of CVE interventions "should be strongly prioritised" (Brett, 2023, p. 460). This paper addresses this pressing need by presenting an evidence-informed theory of change for the Community Integration Support Program (CISP), the longest-running CVE program in Australia.

In recent years, we have witnessed considerable growth in the literature that builds on theories of violent extremism and criminal desistance to develop prospective theories of change for desisting from violent extremist behavior. These theories seek to explain not only what "works" but also how, why, for whom, and in what conditions CVE intervention programs work (Brett, 2023; Cherney & Koehler, 2023; Kamil Abdulsalam et al., 2023; Koehler, 2024). One of the most theoretically advanced efforts in this regard is Cherney and Koehler's (2023) conceptualization of the underlying change mechanism for desistance from violent extremism. They argue that sustained desistance from extremism "involves cognitive transformation, which influences behavioural change" (p. 4). This process encompasses several phases. The first phase involves shifting the meaning and desirability of certain behaviors through "hooks for change" that drive motivations to disengage. Cherney and Koehler (2023) explain how hooks for change "help to facilitate identity transformation in which individuals begin to construct alternative identities and create internalised scripts to help justify exit" (p. 5). This process of cognitive transformation is complex, nuanced, and

iterative, and can be marred by several constraints and limiting conditions at individual, interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and societal levels.

This paper presents evidence-based insights into the CISP, established in the Australian state of Victoria in 2010. Commissioned by Victoria Police, our independent research was conducted with the support of Victoria Police, the Board of Imams Victoria (BOIV), and Corrections Victoria. The research aimed to understand how to engage people meaningfully in the CISP and how to support meaningful desistance from terrorism and violent extremism. This paper focuses on one component of this more extensive research project: developing an empirically informed theory of change for the CISP. The research question we address in this paper is: what main program ingredients enable the CISP to achieve its intended outcome of client desistance from terrorism and violent extremism?

Our research with the CISP offers an empirical basis to better understand the change mechanisms of CVE interventions that aim to support desistance from violent extremism. CVE initiatives are commonly categorized by a public health framing of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention (Harris-Hogan, 2015). Tertiary CVE refers to the disengagement and rehabilitation of individuals involved in violent extremist activities such as terrorism. Secondary CVE refers to early intervention to divert individuals radicalizing toward violent extremism. Primary CVE covers broader prevention efforts, including various forms of community engagement and counter-messaging programs. While the efficacy of CVE programs has been questioned, social scientific literature on all three types of CVE has advanced dramatically over the past decade. It was once common to see reports with titles like "Does CVE work?" (e.g., Romaniuk, 2015). Now, evaluations of CVE programs have become a core component of the CVE literature, and there is extensive evidence that CVE regularly "works" (e.g., Williams & Hulse, 2023). A 2020 systematic review found studies tended to show positive results for tertiary, secondary, and primary CVE efforts (Jugl et al., 2021). A 2022 systematic review of primary and secondary CVE literature found that most studies showed positive results (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022). A review on tertiary CVE published in 2021 similarly concluded that "disengagement and deradicalisation programmes generally work" (Morrison et al., 2021). A 2023 systematic review of secondary CVE found that, outside of the United Kingdom, "[r]esults from the limited number of evaluations

published to date are generally positive, but the evidence base is not yet robust" (Lewis & Marsden, 2023, p. 6).

This reference to the limited nature of the evidence base is consistent throughout recent systematic reviews, all of which highlight that relatively few studies met their criteria for being methodologically sound enough for inclusion and emphasize how much more research is needed. The literature also outlines how CVE works and what approaches are more promising than others (e.g., Cherney, 2018). However, difficulties arise in delving deeper. A key limitation is that the literature often lacks granularity. As a result, it "does not answer the questions that are causing uncertainty for intervention providers" (Raets, 2022, p. 234). Disengagement programs are invariably complex and nuanced (Cherney & Koehler, 2023). They "do not offer a one-size-fits-all solution," and "they cannot work for everyone" (Horgan et al., 2020, p. 9). Nevertheless, "they are of immense practical benefit in some cases" and "warrant continued investment" (Horgan et al., 2020, p. 9).

For this paper, one of the insights to be gleaned from contemporary academic and policy debates on disengagement from terrorism and violent extremism concerns how third parties can support this process. The need for trusted individuals and service providers to deliver CVE interventions is well documented (e.g., Khalil et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2021; Raets, 2022). Cherney and Koehler (2023) note that third parties can influence cognitive transformation, which they consider key to sustained desistance. They argue that "while the actions of formal agents may not play a direct causal factor in triggering desistance, they do play an important role as enablers" (p. 10). Third-party organizations (typically civil society or community groups) can enable individuals to connect with new (pro-)social networks in a manner that state authorities may be unable to achieve. Feve and Dean (2020) argue that in community-based intervention programs (secondary CVE), community partnership is "a logical requirement" (p. 2). They argue that third-party cooperation in correctional settings (tertiary CVE) is "more difficult to advance" but necessary (p. 2). The Global Counter Terrorism Forum (2016) has proposed that governments work "in close partnerships with civil society organizations and communities to enable the treatment to continue after the inmate has left the prison setting" (p. 12). As discussed below, the CISP has always involved partnerships between state authorities and community organizations.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next sections, we briefly trace the historical context and key principles of the CISP and the assumptions underpinning the theory of change for the CISP. This will be followed by a succinct discussion of the methods used in the study. Next, we will present empirical evidence for the main program ingredients and the resulting theory of change. In the paper's final section, we reflect on the implications of the findings for research, policy, and practice.

## The Background of the CISP

The CISP was Australia's first terrorism rehabilitation program, established in 2010 due to concerns over the challenges posed by convicted terrorists entering the Victorian prison system. The recognition of the need to tailor rehabilitation efforts effectively for this relatively new type of crime in the Australian context reflected the adoption of CVE policies by state and federal governments in Australia, which was informed by the international adoption of CVE. In the initial years, CISP focused on the correctional environment, functioning as a tertiary CVE program (i.e., disengagement and rehabilitation). In 2014, a decision was made to expand the role of the CISP to incorporate clients from the community, thus expanding the CISP to also function as a secondary CVE program (i.e., early intervention and diversion).

A more recent catalyst for further policy change was the terrorist incident in Brighton, Melbourne, on 5 June 2017, by an individual who was previously acquitted of charges. In response, the Victorian government established the Expert Panel on Terrorism and Violent Extremism Prevention and Response Powers. The Expert Panel released two reports, the second of which (released in May 2019) addressed CVE (Lay & Harper, 2017). The report made several recommendations relevant to the CISP, including further development of CVE efforts in Victoria with a strong focus on secondary CVE, where significant gaps were found. The report described the CISP as highly important to these efforts, stating that the "CISP is regarded as the foundation of Victoria's approach to prison-based disengagement intervention, with a broadly positive trajectory since its launch" (Lay & Harper, 2017, p. 49). The report also stated that while "the expansion of the program [into secondary CVE] is still

at a relatively early stage, the Panel understands the results to date have been positive" (p. 49) and that "the Panel is of the view that the ongoing delivery of CISP is important to Victoria's disengagement efforts" (p. 51). While the Expert Panel report was responding directly to the Brighton siege, other violent extremist incidents also spurred this imperative for boosting secondary CVE in Victoria. The findings of the coronial inquest into the death of Numan Haider, who stabbed two Victorian Joint Counter Terrorism Team (JCTT) officers in support of Islamic State on 23 September 2014, emphasized the importance of early intervention efforts to assist an extremist individual "back to healthy social networks, and away from dangerous influences" (Coroners Court of Victoria, 2017). In the next section, we focus on the CISP's guiding principles and their relationship to the literature.

## Key Principles Underpinning the CISP

Several principles underpin the CISP's approach to CVE. Key to the CISP approach is a commitment to holistic support provided by community members. The various complementary roles of CISP staff demonstrate this: religious mentors (imams), clinicians, a reintegration officer (who supports participants in transitioning from prison to the community), a family support officer offering help to the families of those on the CISP, and administrative staff. The CISP can also connect participants to external service providers via case managers employed by Victoria Police. This core feature of the CISP is consistent with the notion of assisted desistance and with recent literature that shows how third parties can support the disengagement process (Cherney & Koehler, 2023). It is also consistent with desistance literature that argues that desistance from crime is enhanced when the individualist lens is challenged and should be constructed "as a process of community reintegration, a two-way street between individuals and the wider community" (Maruna, 2016, p. 292).

A second principle underpinning the CISP is a strengths-based approach to support participants to build their capacities to reconnect and reintegrate into the community. CVE literature often distinguishes between disengagement and deradicalization with "disengagement as a concept related to behavioural change in the first instance and deradicalization as a term reflective of psychological and ideological change" (Khalil,

Zuethen, & Marsden 2023, p. 13). For example, the Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) model of violent extremism contends that "greater analytical clarity can be gained through decoupling these two phenomena" (Khalil et al., 2022, p. 438). Several accounts treat disengagement as the more appropriate and achievable option, noting that "some experts suggest that [deradicalization] represents an unrealistic aim [...] Others also highlight concerns about states interfering with personal freedoms of thought and religion" (Khalil, Zuethen, and Marsden 2023, p. 13). However, some research does not make a strong distinction between the two concepts, and refers jointly to "disengagement and deradicalization," without treating them as potentially competing or conflicting goals (Morrison et al., 2021). The CISP uses the language of disengagement rather than deradicalization, reinforcing an approach that focuses on building strengths instead of "taking away" a person's ideological beliefs. The program builds strengths around nuanced understandings of Islam, with clients encouraged to reflect on how this relates to the permissibility of violence in Australia, with most eventually concluding that this conflicts with their deeper understanding of their faith. The strengths-based principle within the CISP aims to help clients desist from crime by addressing needs across multiple domains of a client's life, including, but not limited to ideology. To elevate deradicalization (or ideological change) above these other domains of a person's life arguably reinforces a misunderstanding that certain ideological beliefs inevitably result in violent behavior, and therefore must be a goal of rehabilitation.

The strengths-based approach in the CISP is guided by the Pro-Integration Model (PIM). The PIM is premised on the idea that successful disengagement (meaning sustained and ongoing desistance) requires an individual to be able not just to survive but thrive in a healthier environment: "In short, disengagement [from violent extremism] is actually about engagement somewhere else" (Barrelle, 2015, p. 133). The PIM proposes five categories (i.e., ideology, identity, social relations, coping, and action orientation) that CVE interventions should seek to assist a participant in improving. The five categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive; instead, they invariably intersect and may support and impact each other. All staff involved in CVE case management of CISP clients, regardless of their professional background, their role in the program, or the context of their workplace (e.g., the BOIV,

police, corrections), are required to undertake the PIM training, which is the national CVE case management training in Australia. Participants are required to undertake two full, concurrent, face-to-face training days where they are introduced to the PIM suite of tools, including terminology, subject matter, the strengths and limitations of the tools, how to assess suitability for CVE intervention, how to undertake an in-depth needs-analysis, how to develop an intervention plan (including prioritizing and sequencing intervention goals), how to develop baseline data to measure the effectiveness (or not) of the intervention, how to undertake a client review (including recording positive and/or negative change across the five domains), and the principles of case management. Participants also work through two case studies and collectively debrief with the trainers and fellow participants throughout the days.

The approach taken by the CISP through the use of the PIM is highly consistent with the social scientific literature on disengagement from violent extremism, which highlights that success can come from "opportunities… provided by a new life with family, a new career or a new sense of self-worth" (Morrison et al., 2021, p. 4). The literature similarly emphasizes the importance of focusing on needs and building strengths (Marsden, 2015, 2017; Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022). Indeed, recent frameworks proposed by scholars to achieve sustained disengagement closely resemble the PIM. For example, Khalil, Zuethen, and Marsden (2023) propose a five-fold framework drawn from tertiary CVE research that covers networks, identity, ideology, needs, and wellbeing. The first three match the PIM categories of social relations, identity, and ideology, while their final two categories of needs and well-being closely match the PIM categories of action orientation and coping. Similarly, Raets (2022) describes CVE interventions as tending to cluster into six areas: education and employment, lifestyle and leisure activities, psychological support, family/social support, informal support, and religion/ideology. This framework has certain consistencies with the PIM, as does Raets' (2022) comment that the "common thread running through these diverse efforts… is the basic principle of 'building up pro-social pillars'" (p. 235). Furthermore, Koehler's (2017) re-pluralization theory, which highlights the importance of increasing perceived alternative options for action, value definitions, and political concepts, aligns closely with the PIM categories of action orientation and ideology. One framework that differs substantially from

the PIM is the Phoenix Model, which focuses on identity and does not include a separate category for ideology (Silke et al., 2021).

A third principle underpinning the CISP is its exclusive focus on addressing Islamist violent extremism. This, too, is consistent with several findings in the social scientific literature. First, as noted earlier, the literature emphasizes the importance of community partnerships (Feve & Dean, 2020). Community partnerships in a CVE program inherently imply a degree of specificity, as community partners will be more adept at and appropriate for addressing some ideologies than others. Second, the literature heavily emphasizes the importance of rapport building and the fostering of mutual trust (Stahl et al., 2024), with one review noting that "trust and rapport are routinely identified as a critical determinant of programme success" (Khalil et al., 2023, p. 5). Who a potential CVE participant is willing to trust can depend heavily on the participant's ideology, and the interviews conducted for this project found that the religious credibility of CISP mentors proved critical for eventually winning participants' trust.

Fourth, while the literature is divided on understanding the role of ideology in violent extremism and the extent to which CVE programs should directly address ideology, it nonetheless stresses the importance of ideology in tertiary CVE as this area can involve dealing with highly committed individuals. Khalil et al. (2023) contend that "prison programmes should generally place a heavy emphasis on addressing identity and ideology" (p. 16). This supports the need for specialized CVE staff to address the specific ideology. One study noted that familiarity with the ideology could be crucial to enable CVE staff to build rapport with prospective participants, and some stated that it was inherently necessary to discuss ideology with participants precisely because the participants viewed their ideology as important (Adams et al., 2023).

Finally, a core principle underpinning the CISP is that CVE is worthwhile. As noted earlier, growing evidence shows that CVE regularly "works." Concerning tertiary CVE, the literature overwhelmingly emphasizes that recidivism and re-engagement rates among convicted terrorists are relatively low (Renard, 2020; Silke & Morrison, 2020). This points to the plausibility of terrorist disengagement and rehabilitation. The literature similarly supports the placement of such programs in prisons, with a systematic literature review published in

2021 finding that "imprisonment is a recurring facilitator of the disengagement and rehabilitation process," partly because it provides the opportunity to engage with intervention programs (Morrison et al., 2021, p. 5). Therefore, the scientific literature supports the plausibility of the CISP's goals and the prospect of achieving them by operating in a prison environment. This shows that the guiding assumptions behind establishing the CISP remain well-founded in the current scientific literature while recognizing the complexities and nuances of CVE intervention.

## Assumptions Underpinning the Theory of Change

Several assumptions underpin the theory of change presented in this paper. Assumptions are ideas, beliefs, or principles that inform how we think about an intervention, how it will operate, and who will be involved (Funnell & Rogers, 2014). Key assumptions about features of the way the CISP needs to operate include the following:

- Terrorists can be rehabilitated (i.e., terrorism is *not an exceptional* type of crime), but specialized programs are necessary to help rehabilitate terrorists (i.e., terrorism is nonetheless *a distinctive* type of crime);
- Disengagement from violent extremism is possible when a participant is ready for change and when their psychosocial needs are being met in prosocial ways;
- Targeted and tailored interventions are more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach;
- CVE interventions and participant support will be more effective when they are delivered in culturally appropriate ways;
- CVE interventions must adapt to changing conditions in the terrorism and violent extremist threat environment. For example, current and emerging issues and geopolitical conflicts may need to be incorporated into religious and human mentoring.

Key assumptions about external (non-program) factors that could affect whether the CISP's intended outcomes are achieved include:

- Radicalization to violent extremism is a complex process arising from various individual, community, and structural factors;
- The threat environment for terrorism and violent extremism is dynamic; influences, ideologies, and push-and-pull factors always evolve.

## Methods

The component of our research with the CISP that this paper focuses on – the theory of change – is informed by the literature and rich empirical evidence. The research used a mixed methods approach to comprehensively understand the factors affecting participant engagement in the CISP and the program's impact on participants' disengagement from terrorism or violent extremism. The mixed methods research design involved an approach where both quantitative (client assessments) and qualitative (interviews) data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently. Both components contributed to informing the inquiry problem from different perspectives and levels of analysis, that is, both data (source) triangulation and method triangulation (Patton, 2014). One method's findings helped articulate, extend, or explain results generated by another method (Bryman, 2006). The study received ethics approval from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, the Department of Justice and Regulation Human Research Ethics Committee, and Corrections Victoria.

The qualitative component of the research comprised 52 semi-structured interviews with key program stakeholders, including 24 current or former CISP participants. The CISP participants who were interviewed had been on the program between two months and 13 years at the time of the interview. Participant interviews were conducted using a trauma-informed practice (TIP) approach. TIP recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, is alert to the signs and symptoms of trauma in participants, integrates knowledge about trauma into practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization. TIP was incorporated into the research at every stage, including study design, recruitment, informed consent, data collection, post-data collection, and with regard to the welfare of both the research participants and the research team.

In preparing for and analyzing participant interviews, we familiarized ourselves with the participants through reading court documents relevant to their charges. Written consent was obtained from the participants prior to the interview. When the participants consented to being audio recorded, a professional transcriber subsequently transcribed the recordings. In cases where the participants did not consent to being audio recorded, or audio recording equipment could not be used (e.g., in correctional settings), one member of the research team primarily focused on taking notes, while a second team member primarily focused on conducting the interview. These notes, if handwritten, were transcribed following the interview, and both team members reviewed the typed notes for accuracy and added their reflections throughout.

We thematically analyzed the interview data. We initially familiarized ourselves with the data by re-reading transcripts and interview notes, before constructing preliminary data patterns and themes. Relevant data extracts were collated, and the themes were defined, reviewed, and refined (focusing on meaning coherence) through an iterative process. Throughout this process, we remained in constant discussion to best capture the themes constructed from the interview data. To protect the privacy of interview participants, no attribution or identifying factors have been provided for quotes throughout this paper. Similarly, no pseudonyms are ascribed to participants to protect them from their quotes being collectively collated to provide insight into their identity. We are acutely conscious that "the cloak of anonymity" for participants in this sensitive research may not work (Punch, 1986, p. 46), thus demanding ongoing reflexivity and extraordinary care on our part.

Data for the quantitative component was collected from client assessments held by the CVE Unit within Victoria Police. This data includes each client's scores on the five sectors of the Pro-Integration Model. These scores are completed collaboratively by a multi-agency panel, including representatives from the CISP, all of whom have completed the in-depth two-day PIM training. All client assessments were deidentified for this research. We accessed the assessments and associated progress reports of 35 CISP participants. Of these 35 participants, nine had five years of data, three had four years of data, nine had three, five had two, and nine only had one year of data. We calculated descriptive statistics of the cohort, including age, gender, and general background of the clients.

To obtain a sense of client progress (or lack thereof) within the program, we compared their PIM scores between their first and second year, their first and third year, and their first and fourth year. We first calculated this for each PIM sector. Positive change was defined as when their scores in the second, third, or fourth year were higher than in the first year in the program. Negative change was defined as when their scores in the second, third, or fourth year were lower than in the first year. Being stable was defined as when their scores did not change between the second, third, or fourth year compared to the first year in the program. We aggregated the data to determine how many clients had Mostly Positive, Negative, Stable, or Mixed Change. In this instance, Mostly Positive Change was having at least 3 PIM sectors show positive change between their first year and their second, third, or fourth year; Mostly Negative Change was having at least 3 PIM sectors show negative change between their first year and their second, third, or fourth year; Mostly Stable was having at least 3 PIM sectors show no change between their first year and their second, third, or fourth year; and mixed change was when there was one PIM sector that had no change in scores, two that showed positive change, and two that showed negative change between their first year and their second, third, or fourth year.

## Empirical Evidence for the Theory of Change

*Qualitative Data from CISP Clients*

A major factor that emerged from the interviews is that the CISP is delivered in a culturally appropriate way. One example is that religious mentors come from a cultural background similar to the clients. This is important because the Muslim community is made up of different cultural backgrounds. Each client's background must be considered when assigning them a mentor. Similarly, some clients expressed that a more "Western" and government-heavy approach would not have the same effect and that it is essential to have the program run by an appropriate community-based group. One client stated: "If the government tried [to do this] work in their Western way it wouldn't work. There would be no trust."

The skills of the people delivering the program are another factor many clients highlight as vitally important to its effectiveness. To them, the religious mentors must have

deep knowledge of their religion: "My imam studied in Saudi Arabia for eight years [...] They need to know the texts, have knowledge." For several clients, having access to a religious mentor was vital to their program buy-in. For example, one client expressed that he "found the prospect of sitting with Sheikh [X] appealing and wanted to learn more about my religion – this was the main reason for joining the program." Clients saw engagement in the CISP as an opportunity to learn more about their religion but, crucially, from a more reputable source than the ones that led to their offending. Learning the fundamental principles of Islamic jurisprudence was a common form of Islamic knowledge that CISP participants sought. A participant considered "learning religion properly, especially the principles of Islamic jurisprudence" to be the best part of CISP. Previously, "[o]ur teachers were YouTube. We had no guidance, no help interpreting or making sense of the texts. I wouldn't quit this program for anything," he said. Similarly, another participant pointed out that "they [the imams] draw from some of the same sources as extremists but contextualize it better." Another expressed: "I want to learn Arabic, Islamic jurisprudence. I want to be a scholar. This is my life goal to be an Islamic scholar." Another participant said he joined CISP to get a "free education." Reflecting on the benefits of the CISP, one client noted:

> The theological education I received, I wouldn't have been able to receive anywhere else in Australia […] and that kind of education opened me up to a whole different way of understanding Islam and to comprehending these things.

These were common expressions among the CISP clients we interviewed.

Besides religious knowledge, mentors and other staff working in the program must have good interpersonal skills. Most clients initially view the CISP with great suspicion and will take their time to meaningfully engage with the program. Some outright stated that in the first months, even the first year, they are "testing" the mentors to see if their approach is genuine, honest, and sincere. In this initial phase, the mentors must take their time to earn the client's trust and build rapport with them. Many participants said it was important that their imam is also a good fit for them personally. One participant pointed out that it was beyond "their depth of knowledge. My imam also has the same background as me, we speak the same

language [He] is understanding, but he also laughs sometimes, but not in a judgemental way. He's very jovial. It makes me feel happy, to be with him." Another stated, "personal connection is so important – to be positive – act like my brother, act like my father. Show that care for me."

Another key insight from the interviews is that interventions must be tailored to individual clients' needs. This is true not only in tackling the ideological component of their intervention but also in the clients' learning styles, how to keep them engaged, and what they expect to achieve. Some clients prefer a more structured approach to their mentoring and want to meet frequently. Others appreciate a looser structure, and some clients prefer to take multiple weeks to ponder and reflect on their mentoring sessions. On top of this, non-ideological aspects of the intervention, such as mental and general health and family issues, need to be tailored to the client's specific needs. Some clients required frequent consultations with a mental health clinician, while others did not. Some clients required help reconciling with their families on the outside, and some continued to receive familial support despite their offenses. Some clients wanted to use their time to earn a university degree, while others preferred to pass the time with other activities. It is important that these diverse needs are, in the first instance, recognized and, where possible, addressed.

One final factor to emerge from the interviews highlights the importance of a holistic approach to intervention. The CISP provides not only religious knowledge but also clinical support, family support, and specialized support for clients leaving the correctional system. To the client, this reinforces the idea that the program cares about them as people and not only about their extremism. The following comment made by a client is typical in this regard:

> I don't think it is one thing that made me change, but just everything, all the support I had, helped me see myself and the world differently. It's not really derad, it's you become a better Muslim.

A Victoria Police representative explained:

> You're not just working with the [client], you're actually working with their entire family. You can send your [client] off to… chat to a mentor. That's all fantastic. And talk about all of the kinds of stuff that's bothering you. But then if they come home to a toxic environment, then the two hours that's out of a day, as opposed to the 22 hours where they're living in chaos, or stress, of whatever it is. So, it's a holistic approach, that they need to get services for families, and supports for families.

When the above factors are combined and given the time to take effect, they build trust and rapport between the clients and the CISP, paving the way for clients to meaningfully engage with the program. We examined the quantitative data from their progress reviews to understand if this allowed CISP clients to make positive changes.

*Descriptive Statistics of the CISP Cohort*

CISP participants, whether they are based in the community or the corrections setting, are overwhelmingly male. Of the 35 participants we had quantitative data for, 34 were male, and one was female. Participants have historically skewed towards a correctional setting, with 28 of the 35 going through the corrections system while on the CISP. The average (mean) prison sentence is 15 years (min = 2, max = 42), while the average non-parole period is 11 years (min = 3, max = 31). Those incarcerated for terrorism offenses spent an average of two to three years on remand (min = 1, max = 6). At the time of their offense or arrest, the average age was 25. The youngest participant to have started the CISP was 14, and the oldest started at 45. A corrections-based CISP participant will typically have been convicted of terrorism offenses; of the 28 participants who have spent time in corrections, 25 had terrorism charges, while three had non-terrorism charges.

A CISP participant will typically have a family of their own. Only seven participants were unmarried when they first started on CISP. Seven participants have been divorced at least once, and 14 have children. Out of the 26 participants for whom we obtained mental health data, 20 participants had no diagnosed or observable mental health issues prior to their

offending. Seventeen participants of the 23 we had criminal history data for had no prior criminal history. Three of the six participants with a criminal record had relatively minor offenses (e.g., a speeding offense).

*Quantitative Data on Client Progress*

The analysis of participant progress indicates that the CISP has supported participants in taking positive steps toward disengagement and reintegration. However, this change process often takes time and can vary across the PIM categories (i.e., ideology, identity, social relations, coping, and action orientation). Progress reports for all CISP clients for whom we have data were analyzed to determine if there has been change in the five PIM sectors, examining the difference between Years 1 and 2, 1 and 3, and 1 and 4.

Comparing Year 1 to Year 2

Of the 26 CISP participants with 2 years or more of progress reports, 14 (53%) mostly stabilized across the five PIM sectors between Year 1 and Year 2. As Figure 1 shows, 10 (38%) participants recorded mostly positive change, one had predominantly negative change, and one had mixed results (positive change across two sectors, negative change in two, stable in one). Broken down into the PIM sectors (Figure 2), 12 participants made positive change in the Social Relations sector, and 11 participants made positive change in the Ideology sector. Nine participants made positive change in the Identity sector, 7 in the Coping sector, and 8 in the Action Orientation sector.

**Figure 1: Overall Change in Participant PIM Scores between Year 1 and Year 2**

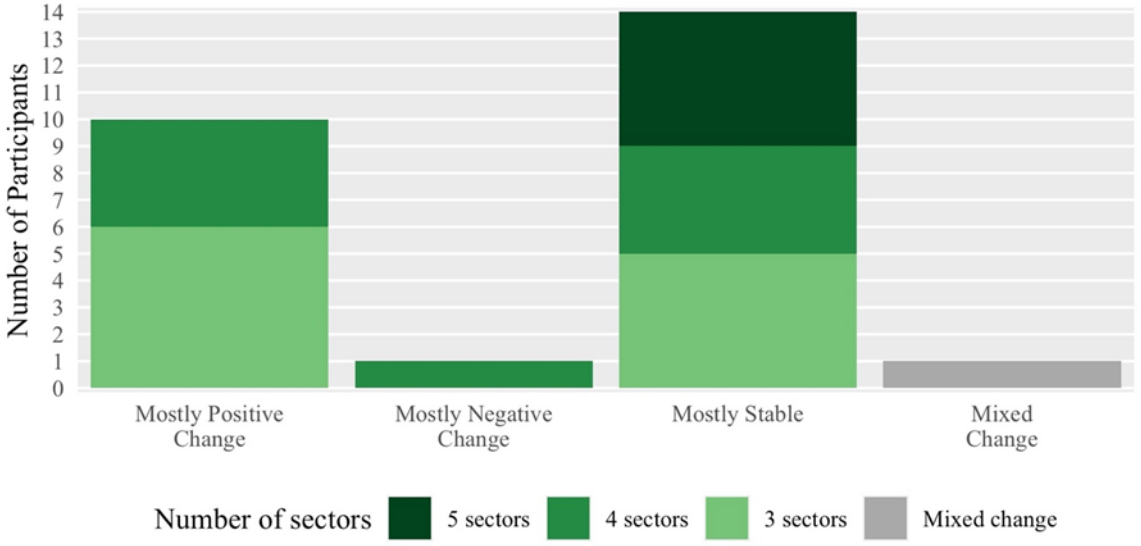
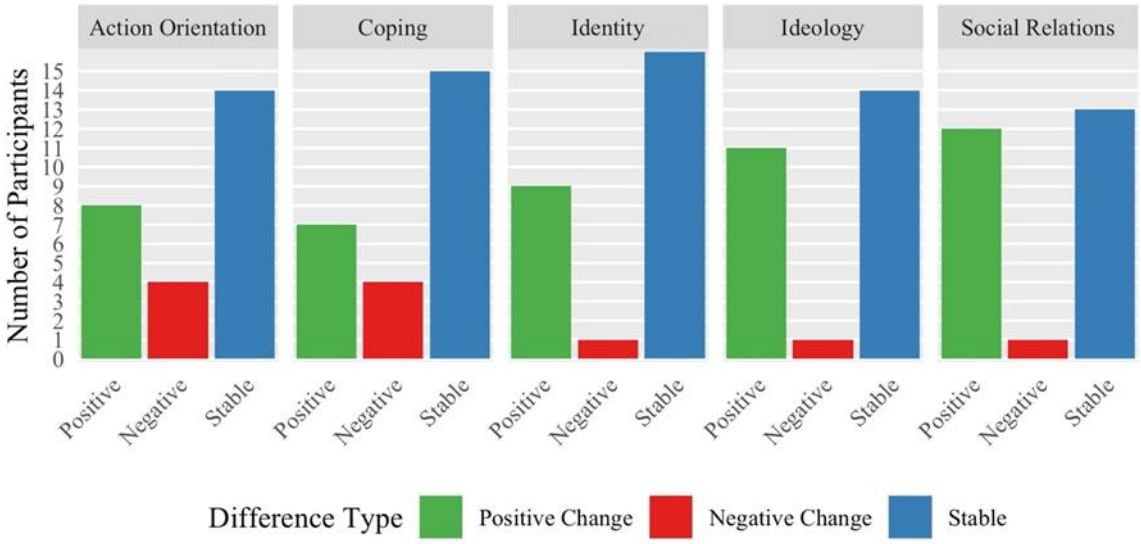



**Figure 2: Change in Participant PIM Scores between Year 1 and Year 2 per PIM Category**




Comparing Year 1 to Year 3

Of the 21 participants with three or more years of progress reports, 11 (52%) participants recorded mostly positive change in their PIM scores between Year 1 and Year 3. As Figure 3 shows, eight (38%) participants mostly stabilized, one recorded mostly negative change, and one had mixed change. Fourteen participants recorded positive change in the

Ideology and Social Relations sectors, eight participants recorded positive change in the Identity and Action Orientation sector, and seven recorded positive change in the Coping sector (Figure 4).

**Figure 3: Overall Change in Participant PIM Scores between Year 1 and Year 3**

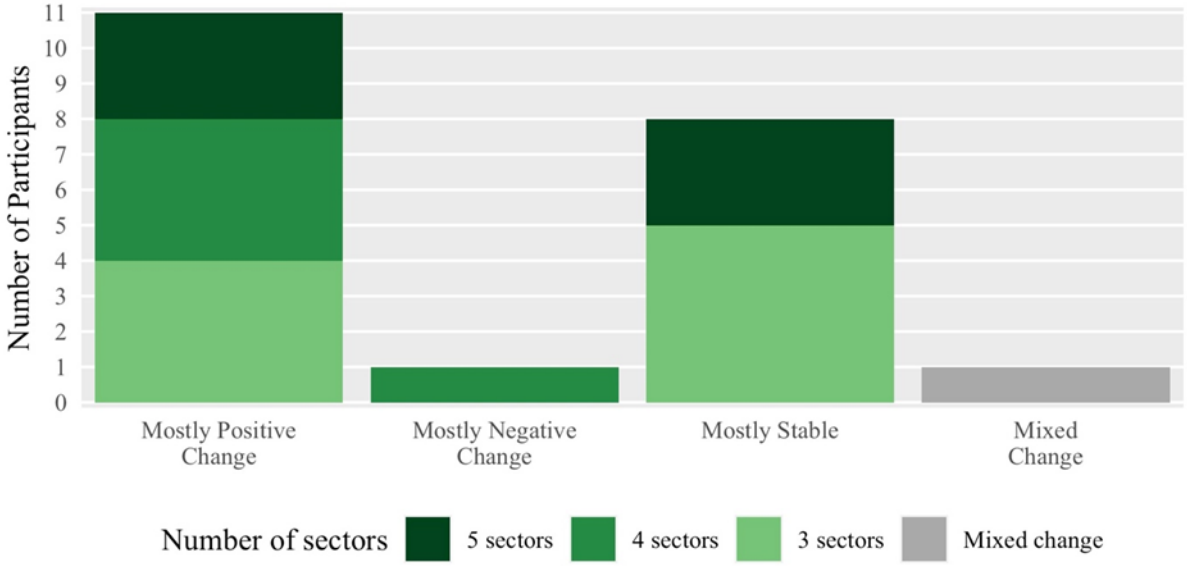
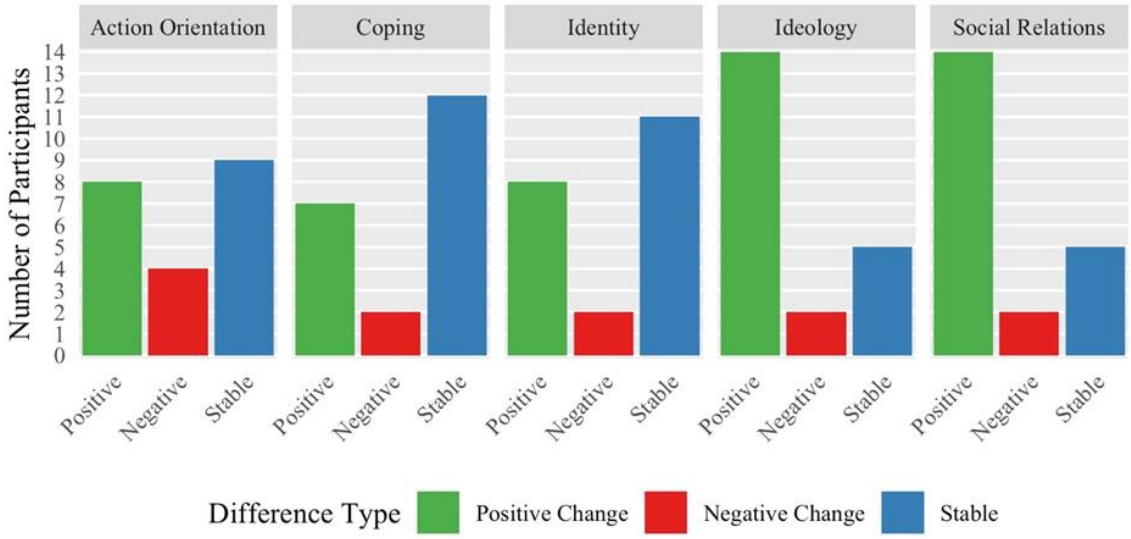



**Figure 4: Change in Participant PIM Scores between Year 1 and Year 3 per PIM Category**



Comparing Year 1 to Year 4

Of the 12 participants with four or more years of progress reports, seven (58%) participants recorded mostly positive change, while two mostly stabilized. Three participants recorded mostly negative change. Progress was most apparent in the Ideology and Social Relations sectors, followed by the Identity and Action Orientation sectors. Coping was the most challenging and the only sector that saw more participants experiencing greater negative than positive change. One potential explanation for this is that terrorist movements fulfil people's needs, albeit in unhealthy ways, and when exiting these movements' participants need to find new ways to address these unmet needs. Therefore, participants may need to build new coping strategies, which may be reflected in their low Coping scores. Similarly, some CISP prison participants struggle to reconcile going to prison for long periods of time for a cause they were no longer committed to participant in. This would also require them to build new coping strategies, which again may be reflected in their low Coping scores.

**Figure 5: Overall Change in Participant PIM Scores between Year 1 and Year 4**

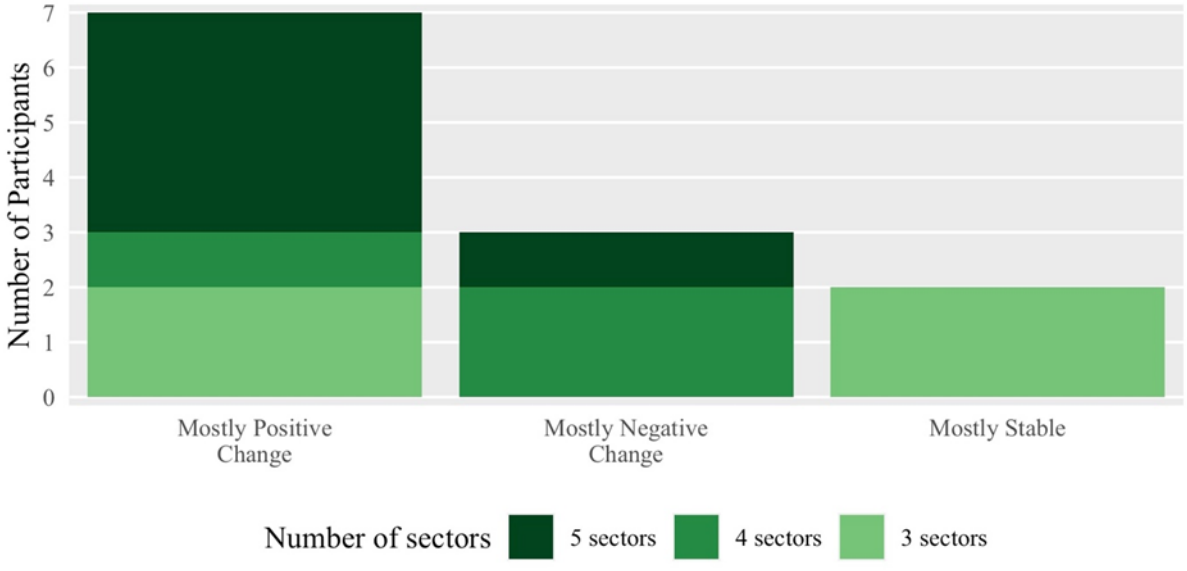
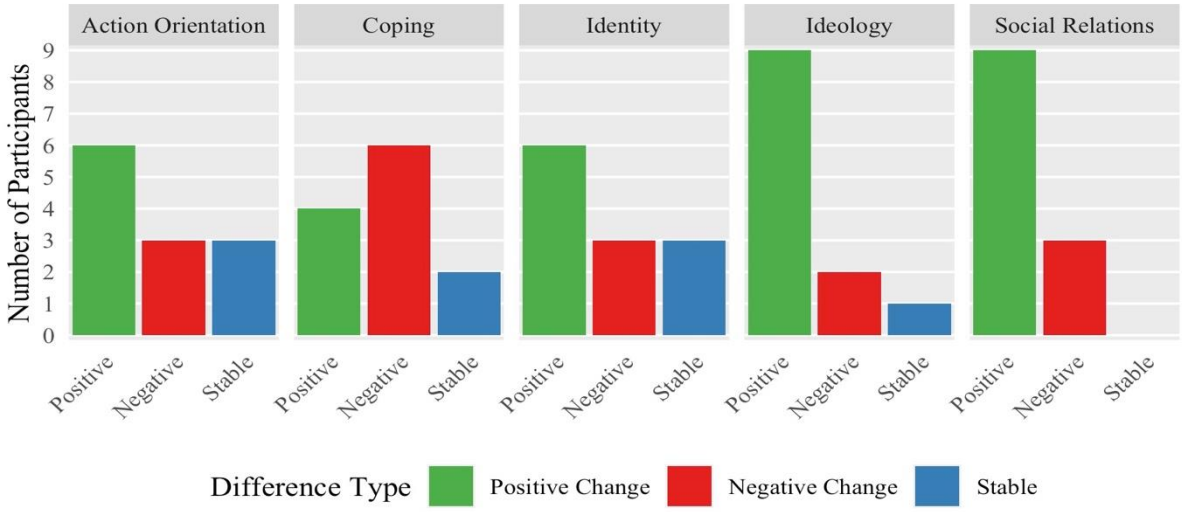


**Figure 6: Change in Participant PIM Scores between Year 1 and Year 4 per PIM Category**




## An Evidence-Informed Theory of Change for the CISP

Drawing on the empirical findings reported in the previous sections, we have constructed a theory of change for the CISP. A theory of change can be used to develop and communicate a program's performance story (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). It supports decision-makers and managers in establishing a clear, shared understanding of program goals and effective strategies to achieve those goals; that is, identifying "the current situation (in terms of needs and opportunities), the desired situation and what needs to be done to move from one to the other" (Rogers, 2011, p. 2). A theory of change visually clarifies how activities are understood to produce outcomes that contribute to achieving the intended longer-term impact. In short, it helps us understand what works, in what circumstances (i.e., internal and external conditions), for whom, and why. We recognize different ways to present a theory of change (Funnell & Rogers, 2014; Rogers, 2011). This paper uses a theory of change statement supported by a program logic model.

In the case of the CISP, the relationships between activities and outcomes outlined in the theory of change are not merely hypothetical or prospective but, as we have shown in the previous sections, derived from empirical research. Theoretically, the theory of change is

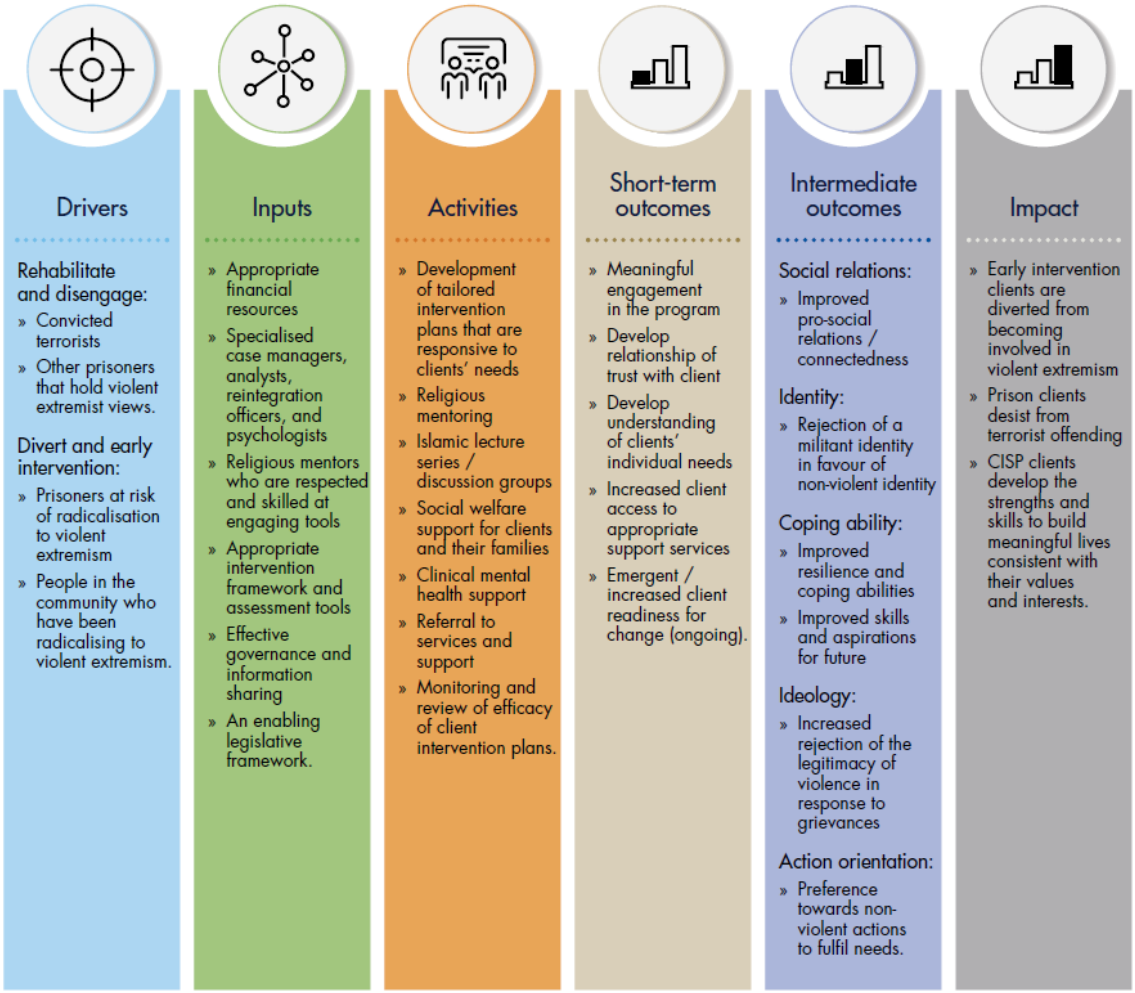
informed by the Pro-Integration Model (Barrelle, 2015) and related scientific literature conceptualizing the five core focus areas: ideology, identity, coping, social relations, and action orientation. The empirical evidence, including rich primary data collected from people who have participated in the program, is a unique feature that enables us to move beyond a generic theory of change to one that is evidence-based and context-related. This feature is remarkably rare in the literature (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022).

The CISP aims to provide support to people in ways that enable sustained disengagement from Islamist violent extremism and reintegration in the community. The theory of change for the CISP can be summarized in the following statement:

> **If** religious and human mentoring and social and clinical support are provided by trusted and skilled staff in a culturally appropriate manner tailored to participants' needs,
> **then** participants will develop meaningful engagement in the program over time and have access to appropriate support services,
> **leading to** diversion from becoming involved in violent extremism or disengagement from violent extremism, resulting in desistance from terrorist offending,
> **because** participants will develop: increased pro-social relations; stronger non-violent identity; greater coping ability, skills, and aspirations; increased rejection of the legitimacy of violence in response to grievances; and preferences towards non-violent actions to fulfil their needs.

The program logic model in Figure 7 visualizes the aforementioned program ingredients through which the CISP seeks to help participants achieve these changes.

**Figure 7: The CISP Logic Model**




## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to respond to the identified need for robust program theory in CVE by presenting an evidence-informed theory of change for the CISP, the longest-running CVE program in Australia. The analysis focused specifically on the main program ingredients that enable the CISP to achieve its intended outcome of client disengagement from violent extremism. These ingredients include the need for the program to be holistic, tailored to individual needs, and delivered in a culturally appropriate way by trusted and skilled staff. The theory of change and the empirical evidence reported in the paper can help support CVE

interventions to move beyond ill-defined or generic theories of change to ones that are evidence-based and context-specific (Brett, 2023). It is important to acknowledge that the environments within which violent extremism and CVE programs operate are both contextual and dynamic. We therefore propose that theories of change for facilitating disengagement from violent extremism also be considered as such. First, they should be tailored to client cohorts' specific situations and needs and the capabilities of third parties (co-)delivering the program. Second, any theory of change should be reviewed regularly and informed by ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) to ensure that programs remain responsive to changing internal and external conditions and new knowledge (Brett, 2023).

The results reinforce critical insights from the literature such as the importance of rapport building and fostering trust (e.g., Stahl et al., 2024), and provide novel insights into the change mechanisms of programs that aim to support disengagement from violent extremism. The findings help add greater granularity to the knowledge base and, by extension, to academic and policy debates on how and in what conditions CVE programs may be effective. At the same time, our research with the CISP highlights contextuality and complexity. The results demonstrate that CISP participants improve consistently over time; however, not all sectors improve at the same rate. Ideology and Social Relations showed the most consistent positive change. Improvement can also be seen in the Identity and Action Orientation sectors, although these changes are often less linear. The Coping sector appears most resistant to sustained improvement.

A key finding is that while some clients show immediate positive change, most clients do not start to show substantive positive change until three or more years in the program. This is significant because the literature has little to say about the importance of time in successful disengagement. The longer someone remains disengaged from violent extremism, the more their disengagement can be judged as sustained. Research in criminology suggests that the risk of recidivism is the "highest in the first year or two following release" (Hanson, 2018, p. 1341). However, these studies are concerned with general crime rather than violent extremism and, therefore, do not necessarily translate into a rule that once a violent extremist has been out of prison for a couple of years, they are at lesser risk of re-engagement. Indeed, the inherently political nature of violent extremism could mean that salient political events that

are occurring at the time they are released may be as or more important than their length of time out of prison. The holistic nature of the CISP seeks to build life-long strengths that protect a person from re-engaging in violent extremism, even under conditions of stress. The CISP staff commit to going on the journey with their clients, throughout their prison sentence and back into the community. The program supports prison clients as they readjust to society and are not pressured to leave the program if they would still benefit from support. CISP staff may personally introduce a client exiting from prison to their local mosque or imam or speak with the imam separately to discuss any concerns they may have about the client returning to the mosque. This is important because sometimes CISP clients (and their families) feel a sense of shame or have been shunned by their broader community, who may worry that associating with the client may lead to suspicion by association. If a client is eventually exited from the program, the door is left open for re-engagement, as well as to mature their relationship with the BOIV as members of the broader Islamic community, rather than as clients. This, again, underscores the fact that disengagement journeys are invariably complex, nuanced, and mostly nonlinear (e.g., Cherney & Koehler, 2023).

A related question is whether the length of time someone engages with a CVE intervention influences the likelihood of successful disengagement from violent extremism. Silke et al. (2021) found that "there is limited information available on the timing of disengagement and deradicalisation processes" and argue that it "would greatly benefit those designing disengagement and deradicalisation programmes to have an understanding as to whether there are, for example, significant transition periods or windows for influencing individual exit" (p. 318). Morrison et al. (2021) similarly call for "more in-depth knowledge about this timing" (p. 42). Our statistical finding that most CISP clients do not show substantive positive change until three or more years on the program is a specific and unique finding in this regard.

The interpretation of this study's findings needs to consider the limitations of our methodology. The observed change over time in the CISP client group suggests that the intervention has had some effect. However, the quantitative measurement does not allow us to demonstrate causation; that is, we cannot definitively demonstrate that the CISP program is the sole cause of the observed pattern of client change (Cherney & Belton, 2023). A

compounding issue is the relatively small sample size for the quantitative analysis, especially for the comparison between Year 1 and Year 4, which is based on 12 participants with four or more years of progress reports. The qualitative data provide an important complement by empirically substantiating CISP clients' and staff's perceptions and lived experiences of the program's contribution to the observed change over time. For this qualitative research strand, a key question is whether, and to what extent, the findings are transferable to other contexts or settings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The specific socio-political and program context within which the study is situated may limit the transferability of the findings. In this paper, we have richly contextualized the program and research setting as a strategy to maximize the potential for transferability (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Future research is needed to ascertain how the results and the constructed theory of change are transferable to other settings. The consistency of both the empirical findings and the CISP's guiding principles with the cutting-edge international literature on CVE programming suggests that the research may generalize through transferability. We invite the reader to consider how the findings resonate with their own experiences and datasets, and to reflect on the implications and learnings for their contexts or settings.

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