HM Prison & Probation Service

Intervening with Extremist Offenders – A Pilot Study.

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In order to respond to the increasing number of individuals convicted of extremist offences HMPPS developed the Motivational and Engagement Intervention (MEI) and the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII). These were piloted in 2010 and 2011, and were the first offender behaviour programmes to be delivered to convicted extremists in England and Wales. The programmes aim to encourage and facilitate desistance and disengagement from extremist offending, regardless of a person's particular ideological background. A process evaluation of the pilot explored the implementation using a qualitative approach. Twenty-two intervention participants and 22 facilitators who delivered the interventions were interviewed. This summary presents the findings of the process evaluation as the first indicative step toward establishing whether the MEI and HII programmes are useful in facilitating desistance and disengagement, and preventing future extremist offending. The findings have led to a number of intervention revisions.

Key findings

- Overall, HII and MEI were viewed positively by facilitators and participants, and are believed to have utility with a range of extremist offenders. Participants reported that the programmes helped them gain an understanding of their motivations for offending and develop strategies to facilitate desistance.

- The interventions were responsive and flexible in sequencing, pace and material. Facilitators particularly praised the focus on personal and social identity and needs, and the capacity to elicit discussions around faith, personal values and goals. Further positive aspects included the motivational and engaging approach used to deliver the interventions, with the supportive and collaborative facilitator-participant relationship playing a key part.

- There was some repetition within and between the MEI and HII, leading to the recommendation to combine the two with a range of mix-and-match modules.

- The interventions may not be suitable for people whose offending is not driven by engagement and identification with an extremist group, cause and/or ideology.

- For participants who justified offending on religious grounds, a twin-track approach of addressing psycho-social issues alongside religious and/or political issues is recommended.

- Barriers to engaging in treatment were reported to include solicitors dissuading offenders from participating, and a previous lack of engagement between individuals and sentence management staff.

Preventing victims by changing lives

Background

In 2008, in response to the new population of offenders sentenced under Terrorism Legislation in England and Wales (and those convicted of extremist offences under associated legislation), a small team within HMPPS (formerly NOMS) was created to develop appropriate ways in which to prevent extremist offending[1] through the delivery of interventions.

A thorough review of the literature was initially undertaken, followed by concentrated casework with volunteer extremist offenders in custody to: 1) learn about the individual's journey into extremist offending, 2) consider possible approaches to engage and work with them, and to 3) explore what might facilitate their desistance[2] and disengagement.[3]

This casework and literature review on extremism (Jacobson, 2010; Bjorgo, 2011) indicated that identity and issues associated to identity were important in explaining why individuals engage in extremism, and commit extremist offences. Individuals involved in extremist offending appear to undergo a process of engagement, gradually making increasing commitments to a group, cause and/or ideology, for various personal reasons (including, for example, wanting to redress some real or perceived injustice, to find meaning or purpose, or to attain status). As the individual increasingly identifies[4] with a group, cause and/or ideology, the extremist aspect of their identity replaces others, and helps them to overcome inhibitions that might prevent offending behaviour. This emerging pathway corresponded with current theories on radicalisation (Horgan, 2008), and has been referred to in HMPPS as the non-criminal pathway into extremism.

Casework also identified another group, with a history of offending, but whose involvement did not appear to be accompanied by any significant identification with a group, cause and/or ideology, and instead appeared opportunistic. These individuals tend to already hold attitudes supportive of violence and criminality, and they are prepared to perpetrate offences and harm others on behalf of an extremist group, cause and/or ideology out of self-interest (including, for example, to profit, commit violence for the sake of violence, or to dominate others).

Collectively, this learning from the casework, literature and associated research (Karmani, 2009) was assimilated into Structured Risk Guidelines (SRG) to help assess risk and identify appropriate strategies for intervention, management and monitoring for individuals convicted of extremist offences. These guidelines were piloted and independently evaluated across a number of prisons and probation regions in 2011. The results of this pilot, together with a growing body of casework evidence, informed a review of the SRG and the Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG) 22+ was subsequently developed (Webster, Kerr and Tompkins, 2010; Lloyd and Dean, 2016).

The ERG22+ contains 22 factors that account for the two pathways into extremist offending. Effective interventions are those that target factors directly associated with offending behaviour (Andrews and Bonta, 2010), and therefore, the risk factors identified by the ERG22+ provided an important foundation upon which HMPPS' interventions, HII and MEI, were developed.

Whilst it was acknowledged that other countries were also looking at individually-focussed programmes for extremist offenders, they too were in the early stages of development, and none existed that could easily be refined and adopted within England and Wales.

There was no simple model, theory, or rationale on which to base an intervention to address the factors associated with the non-criminal pathway into extremism. Thus, MEI and HII were designed and developed based on a range of different sources, theories, models and data. Whilst aspects of the interventions were designed to accommodate some of the unique features of extremist offending, such as identity development, group processes and mindfulness, the interventions were also based on research and principles that already have utility in effectively addressing other types of offending behaviour. MEI and HII sought to integrate well-established theoretical approaches to offender rehabilitation, including the Risk-Need-Responsivity principles, the Good Lives Model and Desistance literature (Bonta and Andrews, 2007; Maruna and Roy, 2007; Day, Casey, Ward, Howells and Vess, 2010). MEI and HII also included evidenced-based methods for effective interventions, such as pro-social modelling, emotional management and cognitive restructuring (Dean, 2014).

MEI was developed to strengthen participant motivation and engagement with the intervention process, dispel

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[1] HMPPS defines extremist offending as any offence committed in association with a group, cause and/or ideology that propagates extremist views and actions and justifies the use of violence and other illegal conduct in pursuit of its objectives.

[2] Desistance here refers to the cessation of offending, and the unwillingness to harm others or offend on behalf of a group, cause and/or ideology.

[3] Disengagement refers to the process by which an individual moves away (ceases associations with, or affiliation with) from an extremist group, cause and/or ideology.

[4] Identification refers to the process an individual undergoes as they come to define who they are and what matters to them through their association or affiliation with an extremist group, cause and/or set of ideas.

myths and reduce fears about what such an intervention actually involved (including to overcome some extremist offenders' distrust for those in authority), prepare individuals for more intensive intervention work (i.e. the HII) and also to prevent future offending by those whose interest in, or engagement with an extremist group, cause and/or ideology was deemed peripheral and therefore did not require intensive intervention.

As stated, the research and casework that was conducted to understand how best to respond to the identified risk factors suggested that working with identity issues was central to why individuals both engage, desist and disengage from such offending (Bjorgo and Horgan, 2009). Individuals who turn their backs on extremism and extremist offending often do so because it no longer fulfils their expectations, priorities or values; it no longer reflects the type of person they want to be.

In psychological terms, extremism becomes an aspect of themselves that they no longer identify with (Dean, 2014). As a result, psycho-social identity development theories were identified as key components of the HII, and the intervention was developed to encourage participants to re-examine their extremist identifications and commitments, and explore doubts they may have had about their ongoing involvement. It was also developed with the specific aim of helping participants to become less willing or prepared to harm others, or to offend, regardless of their engagement with an extremist group, cause and/or ideology. Even if disengagement may not be realistic for some individuals, the intervention's focus was on aspects of the participant's thinking and behaviour that facilitated and encouraged desistance, regardless of the extent to which disengagement took place.

MEI and HII were piloted in 2010 and 2011 with those convicted of extremist offences across different groups, causes and/or ideologies. An evaluation of the pilots was undertaken that sought to explore and capture both participants' and facilitators' experiences of the MEI and HII interventions. Additionally, it examined the nature and impact of the context, culture and mode of delivery of these two interventions.

The pilot evaluation had two key aims:[5]

1. To explore the participant and facilitator experience of HII and MEI during the pilot delivery.

2. To inform the ongoing progression and development of MEI and HII.

Method

Given the pilot status of the interventions and the small sample size, the evaluation utilised qualitative methods to explore participant and facilitator experiences of the interventions. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Four prisons (three high security establishments, one young offender institution) and six probation trusts volunteered to deliver the interventions. All the pilot sites were included in the study. The interventions were offered to 33 extremist and group-affiliated offenders, 22 of whom consented to participate in the study. The sample consisted of:

- fourteen al-Qaeda influenced offenders
- two extreme right wing offenders
- one animal rights extremist offender
- one other political extremist offender
- four gang affiliated offenders[6]

Participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis following completion, using a semi-structured interview schedule designed for the study. They also completed a participant feedback form which explored their participation in MEI and/or HII. Ten feedback forms were completed and returned to the researchers (a response rate of 45%).

The 22 facilitators were interviewed individually by telephone, using a structured interview schedule. They also completed a facilitator feedback form and made observations about their own work and the progress of participants over the course of the intervention.

Results

The participants and facilitators were overwhelmingly positive about the interventions, with consensus that MEI and HII are useful for addressing extremist offending and appropriate for the target group for which they were designed. The interventions were considered to be responsive and have flexibility in the sequence, pace and content of material delivered.

The majority of intervention participants reported that MEI and HII helped them to understand the motivations for their offending and equipped them with strategies to facilitate their desistance. The interventions approach,

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[5]As a result of the evaluation revisions made to MEI and HII, the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII): Foundation and Plus has now been mainstreamed across HMPPS.

[6]Although HII was initially developed to target the factors associated with extremist offenders (primarily al-Qaeda influenced offenders), as the focus of the HII is on identity and status issues, group influence and

polarised 'them and us' thinking, it was also suggested that the intervention may have traction with gang-related offenders. It was therefore decided to widen the scope of the pilot to include some gang-affiliated offenders where identification with a group (or gang) seemed to have had a functional role in violence they committed towards other groups of individuals. Since the roll-out of HII, Identity Matters (IM) has been developed as an Intervention for Group Affiliated offenders.

which focuses on personal and social identity, needs and values, rather than political or religious beliefs, was seen to positively target cognitive rigidity around such beliefs. Participants reported that the interventions elicited discussions about faith, personal values and goals. The motivational and engaging approach of the interventions was also considered helpful in developing a strong facilitator-participant relationship, which participants reported to be a key part of their process of change.

The interventions were considered to have potential utility with a range of extremist offenders and also with some gang-affiliated offenders (with appropriate adaptations made to the interventions). It was clear from participant feedback that, as intended, the approach of both interventions was motivational and engaging, with the relationship between participant and facilitator playing a key role in the process of change.

Some areas for improvement were identified. There was some indication of repetition within and between MEI and HII. Combining them to create a single intervention with a range of modules that could be undertaken on a mix-and-match basis was suggested as a way to overcome repetition and provide a clearer structure within which a facilitator could encourage and facilitate desistance and disengagement. This led to a recommendation for a booster intervention to be designed that would allow important elements of the intervention to be covered at future points in an individual's sentence, to consolidate changes made towards desistance and disengagement.

For some offenders, particularly al-Qaeda influenced extremist offenders, where there was a strong identification with a political or religious ideology, or both, the process evaluation highlighted the need to address these particular ideological needs, and their impact on engagement in an extremist group, cause and/or ideology as well as offending. Where religious ideology (especially where religious misinterpretations or misconceptions underpin justifications for offending and violence) was particularly salient, a twin track approach of addressing psycho-social issues alongside religious and/or political issues was strongly supported by participants.

It was recognised in a small number of cases that the interventions may not be suitable; this was generally where offending was not related to identification with a group, cause and/or ideology, and was associated with a criminal pathway into extremism.

Barriers to some extremists cooperating and participating in the interventions were identified. A third of participants who were initially approached declined participation. These individuals gave reasons such as following their solicitor's advice and the timings of the intervention. In addition, facilitators reported a previous lack of engagement between individuals and sentence management staff as being a barrier to engaging in the interventions. This is consistent with previous research showing that extremists convicted under the Terrorism Act are likely to need encouragement to engage in interventions (Pickering, 2012). It was suggested that these factors may be overcome in time, as the interventions become established and are better understood.

Limitations

The study was limited by the small number of participants and facilitators who took part in the pilot of the interventions. A further limitation, was the low response rate for participant feedback forms, resulting in a sample that may not be representative of all those who took part. Furthermore, there may be some bias in this data, given that participants who had the most positive or most negative experiences may be most likely to respond. As this study was a process evaluation, it did not explore outcomes or impact of the interventions on those who have taken part to examine the programmes' efficacy.

Discussion

The process evaluation of the pilot of HII and MEI explored programme participant and facilitator experiences of the interventions and found the interventions were well received. Participants reported an increased understanding of their motivations for offending and discussed how they had developed strategies to facilitate desistance. The approach adopted was found to be appropriate for working with a number of different extremists who have a range of motivations for their offending behaviour.

The understanding and insight gained from the pilot evaluation has informed the ongoing implementation and development of the HII, and specific recommendations for changes to the content and future delivery of the interventions.

As some overlap between the interventions was identified, it was recommended that MEI and HII be amalgamated and the distinction between the MEI and HII are now reflected in different parts of HII, the Healthy Identity Intervention Foundation and the Healthy Identity Intervention Plus, respectively.

A second recommendation made was for the development of a twin-track approach, combining the HII intervention with religious or theological input. This is recommended for participants whose offending may have partly resulted from some misinterpretation of Islamic or other religious scripture.

This was HMPPS' first exploration and analysis of an intervention with convicted extremists. The evidence on which the recommendations are based is qualitative. Despite some limitations in the methodology and the small sample size, the evaluation findings were insightful and encouraging to the continued and developing approach to intervening with extremists. Since this study was conducted, the revised HII (incorporating the recommended changes detailed above) has been implemented nationally as an intervention to encourage and facilitate desistance and disengagement from extremist offending.

Further research is now needed to explore the impact and outcomes of HII. HMPPS is currently developing an impact evaluation of HII to explore outcomes over the longer term and across national delivery.

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