

2021

RESEARCH BRIEF

# AN EXAMINATION OF COMPETENCIES FOR AND THE EVALUATION OF CVE IN POLICING

Sara K. Thompson (Criminology, Ryerson University)

Feras Ismail, (Detective-Sergeant, Peel Regional Police)

with

Matthew Murray, (University of Western Ontario)

Lorna Ferguson, (University of Western Ontario)

TSAS RB 2021-01



**TSAS**

canadian network for research on  
terrorism, security and society

Research Briefs are short, engaging and accessibly written descriptions of the results of TSAS funded research projects, focusing on top-level conclusions and policy relevance. Research Briefs are invited submissions from TSAS grant recipients only. We do not accept unsolicited submissions to this series at this time.

---

The Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society TSAS is supported as a national strategic initiative funded by SSHRC and Public Safety Canada, along with the following departments of the federal government:

- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
- Canadian Security Intelligence Service
- Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada
- Correctional Services Canada
- Defence Research and Development Canada
- Global Affairs Canada • Security Intelligence Review Committee
- Office of the Communications Security Establishment Commissioner

TSAS also receives financial support from several Canadian universities, including the University of Waterloo. Views expressed in this manuscript are those of the author(s) alone.

For more information, contact the Director of the Network, Lorne Dawson, Balsillie School of International Affairs, University of Waterloo ([ldawson@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:ldawson@uwaterloo.ca)) or Elizabeth Ford Project Manager of TSAS [ec2ford@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:ec2ford@uwaterloo.ca).

## Introduction

Over the past several decades, Canadian public agencies have invested significant resources in their efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism at home and abroad (Littlewood, Dawson & Thompson, 2020; Public Safety Canada, 2019). These efforts have prompted the decentralization and localization of national security efforts – particularly in the prevention/intervention space – and a concomitant growth in the number of programs, strategies and initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism (hereafter CVE) among local police services of jurisdiction (Thompson & Leroux, 2020; Thompson & Bucerius, 2020).

The community-engagement/partnership ethos that underpins much modern Canadian police work – including CVE work - not only structures the police role and work environment, but also influences how individual police officer's performance is evaluated. Little is yet known about how police services measure officer performance in what can be a particularly challenging area of police work: community engagement type activities in general, and CVE in particular.

Current competency models – such as the Canadian Police Sector Council Model and the OACP-Ontario Model – do not specifically enumerate competencies that are specific to CVE-related tasks (or, for that matter, for more general community policing and engagement activities, which underpin much CVE work). If police services do not specifically include CVE-related competencies within their hiring and promotion models, how do they evaluate these important tasks? Further, what might be the net effect on individual police officers (and thus on services and their communities more broadly) if CVE-related work is not appropriately recognized and rewarded by police agencies?

Drawing on expert interviews (n=10), an environmental scan of current practices within one Canadian province (Ontario), and insights generated by a police-academic working group assembled for this project, this research documents:

1. the types of CVE activities police officers in Ontario are currently engaging in;
2. the state of police service performance assessment tools in relation to measuring officer community engagement and CVE work; and
3. whether police officers engaged in CVE work feel that existing metrics adequately capture and assess the complex nature of prevention-based CVE duties.

## Methodology

This research report will provide an overview of the data collected from two of the three sources identified above: interviews with 10 police officers engaged in CVE work in two Ontario police services (see attached interview schedule) and a series of conversations with our working group comprised of academic and police subject matter experts (representing three universities

and four police services in the province of Ontario, n = 11). We digitally recorded and transcribed all interviews, manually coded the data, and independently verified the coding scheme. We supplemented the interview data with insights and information shared over the course of three meetings of the police-academic working group established for the purposes of this research.

It is important to note that because our sample size is small (we conducted 10 interviews with police officers; the police-academic working group is comprised of 11 members), our study can provide preliminary insights into the work of CVE officers and the core competencies required for CVE across Canada or elsewhere. Given that CVE is an emerging policy objective in Canada, the overall number of officers doing this work is necessarily small, which precludes the construction of a larger sampling frame at this time. As such, this research should be understood as a preliminary attempt to document the scope of CVE work being undertaken by police services in Ontario, the necessary skills and assets required to do this work well, and the current state of competencies and metrics applied in assessing the performance of officers working in this space.

This report proceeds in four sections. The first section provides an overview of our data in terms of who does CVE work and how it is operationalized by the police officers in our sample (and the services they represent). Section two describes the CVE duties officers are engaged in and the skills/competencies they feel are necessary to do this work well, while the third section examines how CVE work is measured and evaluated, along with limitations of current evaluation processes and possible solutions. A short concluding section offers some final thoughts and directions for future research.

### **Section One: Who does CVE work and how is it conceptualized and defined?**

CVE activities are generally undertaken by officers working in either Community Engagement and Inclusion bureaus (which sometimes oversee hate crime responsibilities) or stand-alone CVE and Hate Crime units. Study participants report that officers working in such units are best positioned to take carriage of this work, due to their community engagement orientation and extensive community-based relationships, officer skill sets, and because of the many and varied connections that exist between violent extremism and hate-motivated crimes and incidents. At the same time, other, less formalized CVE work is sometimes undertaken as a function of more general patrol, school resource officer, and community policing and engagement activities (though respondents report that sometimes CVE work undertaken by these officers may not be recognized as such). As such, and unlike policing activities more generally, which are often demarcated into a generalist/specialist binary, CVE work on the part of the services in our sample appears to involve a combination of generalist *and* specialist officers. More specifically, CVE activities reported by study participants involve a cadre of subject matter experts (SMEs) with highly specific training and skillsets, complemented by generalist officers, who may or may not have received baseline training designed to support them in recognizing signs of radicalization to violence (hereafter RTV).

The officers in our sample generally conceptualized and defined violent extremism to include a spectrum of ideologies, belief systems and grievances inspired by a diverse array of political, social and religious factors (or some combination thereof). The operational focus is on individuals vulnerable to or displaying signs of RTV in the ‘pre-criminal space’ – that is, in the early to mid-stages of the RTV process and before any related criminality has taken place. As such, CVE work for the officers in our sample involves a series of prevention/early intervention-type activities, operationally separate and distinct from more traditional police investigative and enforcement activities. As one officer reported: *“Arrest and prosecute? You have to take that right out of your mind. Why? Because not every kid is a criminal, and there’s [sic] so many points along their path [where] there can be an intervention made. It’s about helping people and steering [them] in a direction that is productive.”*

## **Section Two: What does CVE work entail and what unique skills/competencies are required?**

We asked officers a series of questions about the CVE work they engage in, including task specifics. Officers typically described participation in a host of community engagement activities as a core feature of this work and cited a number of examples, from attending community- and religious-based group meetings, answering phone inquiries and giving presentations to diverse groups aimed at education/training (on CVE, hate crime and related programming, given the established nexuses that exist between these phenomena) and building trusting relationships. Other CVE-specific work our sample reported participating in include early intervention-type activities intended to divert individuals vulnerable to or in the early stages of RTV toward resources and services that may help put them on more pro-social trajectories. These interventions are designed and operationalized under the auspices of specialized CVE programming, which is developed and overseen by specialist officers. At the same time, study participants commonly reported that generalist officers are (or could be) critical to successful CVE work in their respective services; general patrol, school resource officers, and those engaged in community policing activities are thought to be well positioned (due to the extensive community interaction associated with their duties) to identify or receive information about individuals at risk of RTV in the broader community.

Study participants were also asked about what types of skills/competencies they see as necessary for successful CVE work. Many argued that a solid grounding in the basic elements of patrol work is critical: *“The first thing I would say is that I think it’s important to have all of the basics of policing. It’s important that the people that come into [this area] have a well- rounded career, that understand policing, different types of calls...that understand frontline policing.”* Another officer echoed this view, emphasizing that general duty means *“having [exposure to] so many different calls and different people”* and that this diversity helps to prepare one not only for *“what’s coming on the other end of that radio”* as a patrol officer, but also for responding to the complex and varied nature of much CVE work. Interviewees also cited solid investigational

skills as a necessary competency; while the ability to conduct an investigation is a core competency required of general duty officers, study participants viewed a higher level of investigational competency as important in the CVE context as well. A particular asset in this regard is interview experience and, ideally, forensic interviewing courses, which help to “ask the right questions. Those things always help you with dealing with people. Because whether it’s a CVE [file] or not, you’re still dealing with people, and you can use those tools and apply it [in the CVE context].”

Interviewees also emphasized skills/competencies that are not currently enumerated within the competency frameworks that most police services in Ontario draw upon. For example, many emphasized the importance of possessing and demonstrating emotional intelligence (EI), a key element of which is empathy: “In my current role, I’d say that turning on your humanity is what you need to do. You need to have empathy.” As was put to us, officers doing CVE work must be community oriented and willing to invest “the time to learn and be open to learning about [diverse] communities...and understanding the context of politics within communities because politics often lead to conflict”. Interviewees also highlighted lived experiences with and exposure to different cultures and ways of life, the ability to communicate effectively with diverse audiences, and the capacity to ‘think outside the box’ as critical assets for officers working in CVE-related areas.

### **Section Three: How is CVE work currently evaluated; limitations of current evaluation processes and possible solutions.**

Policing as an institution is primarily driven by measures and targets. Whether it be crime rates, call volumes or response times, few police agencies are immune to the need to enact modern forms of bureaucratic control that can structure operations, justify police decision-making and satisfy oversight bodies. One of the many areas in which policing metrics are employed is in the field of officer performance evaluations. Policing typically rewards those individuals who ‘make good arrests,’ or otherwise meet measurable enforcement targets (Huey 2007). In the case of an arrest or a ticket, the ability to measure outcomes is quite straightforward: you have a tangible paper trail. How, then, do police services document non-events (i.e. crimes prevented) and assess officer performance in the prevention/intervention space? As one officer pointed out, with CVE, “the preventative portion of the work is the work [emphasis added]”.

We asked participants how their performance is measured, and their work evaluated, given difficulties with measuring preventative efforts. Most reported being unclear as to how CVE work is evaluated within their respective organizations: “I really don’t know how it works, to be honest,” an officer at another agency noted:

*“In terms of evaluating the successes of it or the failures of it, I don’t know how that’s done...I*

*think we're all trying to figure that out. Even in the work that we do from a community engagement perspective, one of the downsides of it is if you compare that to investigative police work or the operations side...if I'm a patrol officer, if I'm an investigator, I can say how many cases I've taken on, this is how many arrests I've made, this is how many criminal charges I've laid...On the flip side of the coin, when you talk about prevention, how do you measure that? This has been the dilemma in policing for many, many years. How do you measure proactive police work? And just because you can't [currently] measure it, it doesn't mean it's not valuable."*

In place of arrests, officers typically described the quantification of 'soft targets' such as participation in community engagement activities, meetings, and so on. As one officer explained: *"As far as I'm aware, the only way it's measured is that you count how many presentations you've done, how many meetings you've done, and maybe your boss might get an email saying he did a great job. That's about it."* Similarly, an officer from another service reported that the general approach to evaluating such activities involves little more than *"just quantify[ing]it."*

Officers who engaged in CVE work are assessed using the same core competencies that are applied to officers doing more reactive, enforcement-based work: *"It's like when it comes to community policing and prevention it's tough to put a stat on that. It's not like I made 30 arrests last month, gave out 30 tickets look at me I'm a star. Meanwhile, it's like I went to every single mosque and every single temple and I get nothing to show for it."* For the purposes of evaluation, then, CVE officers are treated as generalists within their agencies, rather than as specialists. Assessing all officers against core generalist enforcement-based metrics can (and does) have negative and potentially career-limiting effects for those working in community engagement/prevention-based units: *"If you look at my stats today...tickets, criminal arrests, everything to do with [me] as a conventional police officer and you looked at me on paper, you'd be like 'what has this guy done in the last 2 years?'"*

How, then, can an officer avoid being a non-typical, or outlier, 'generalist' when being evaluated for promotions or lateral transfers against more typical or normal 'generalists within an organization?' Some of the officers we interviewed reported that Personal Development Forms (or PDFs, annual performance reports that are completed by individual officers and their supervisors) provide opportunities to craft narratives that highlight aspects of engagement/prevention work generally not captured in current competencies/performance metrics: *"In our PDF we fill out [self-report] sections where, you know...I put my blurbs down there about my engagement and stuff."* Another officer made sure to keep detailed information on his work activities so that his evaluation included all the youth engagement work he had done in local schools: *"I wrote it down, and I highlighted it [in my PDF]."* Why? Because within policing, he argued, *"You're only as good as you are on paper."* Another officer noted that a way to avoid the "generalist trap" was by *"getting commendation letters"* for information or other work that helped contribute to an arrest. However, such commendation letters must be initiated by the officer's supervisor(s), whom in some cases, may not fully appreciate or understand the value of such work since it differs from what is traditionally rewarded in policing, namely: the number of arrests made and tickets laid. Alternatively, officers might receive positive feedback from the

community that, if reported in the annual report, could contribute to a positive evaluation. It is, however, generally incumbent upon individual officers to draw attention to this work (often via their annual PDFs). This self-reported information notwithstanding, a reliance on outcome measures of officer efficacy (arrests, etc.) coupled with an approach that quantifies prevention/engagement-type activities (but fails to measure and assess the *quality* of those efforts) appears to be a common approach to evaluating officer performance across the police services that participated in this research.

## Conclusions

When asked how CVE-related duties should be measured and assessed, officers in our sample highlighted the need to develop CVE-specific competencies and metrics. In the case of specialist officers, for example, the development of a performance model specific to CVE-related duties is needed; for generalist officers whose duties require that they perform some CVE functions (for example, School Resource Officers, or SROs), the development of a suite of CVE/community engagement metrics are necessary to supplement existing generalist competencies and performance models. Our data also highlight the need for, and importance of, more and better training for both generalist and specialist officers. The training should provide officers with a clear understanding of ‘what we know’ from the research literature (and practitioner experience) about the various social, political, and religious factors that, when aligned, may create an ‘extremist vortex’ that draws people into a variety of closed-loop echo chambers. The training should also highlight the various external factors that help amplify extremist rhetoric (i.e. media, politicians, etc.), while providing examples (with an emphasis on case studies, which are particularly pedagogically effective in the context of professional education) that speak to how community-based prevention work can and has been successfully utilized to identify individuals at risk of mobilizing towards violent extremism, what supports are in place for such individuals, and how they can access such resources. Other important aspects of training include a focus on the spectrum of different types of extremism, the role of ideology/grievance, the radicalization to violence process and related behavioural signs, and the importance of prevention/early intervention activities in the national security space. It is also very important that all members of identified bureaus, whether recognized as generalists or specialists, as well as their supervisors and commanding officers (i.e. Inspectors and Superintendents), receive this training. This ensures that all members understand the value and importance of community-based CVE-related duties, which should help make certain that officers’ CVE-related work – broadly defined - is recognized, acknowledged and rewarded.

Another suggestion put forward was for police supervisors to “*clarify the objectives of what they’re trying to do*” with CVE/community engagement activities. If clearly laid out, such objectives could then help guide the development of a competency framework and evaluation process for work that the officers we interviewed believe is not well captured within existing performance models. Establishing a competency framework can allow for directed attention, mobilized efforts, increased persistence, and the development of strategy.

The practitioner-academic working group that was struck for the purposes of the current research has expressed great interest in continuing our work to construct a more expansive, flexible list of core competencies for officers undertaking CVE duties (generalist and specialist). Because CVE work in many ways overlaps with community policing and engagement activities more generally, we expect that many of the CVE-specific competencies and metrics may also be applicable to generalist/specialist officers undertaking more general prevention and community engagement duties. We are currently seeking funding that will enable us to develop and pilot such competencies and metrics in one or a small number of Canadian police services.

## Works Cited

- Huey, Laura. (2007). *Negotiating Demands: The Political Skid Row of Policing in Edinburgh, San Francisco and Vancouver*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Littlewood, Jez, Lorne Dawson & Sara K. Thompson. (2020). *Terrorism and Counter- Terrorism in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Public Safety Canada. (2019). *2018 Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada: Building a Safe and Resilient Canada*. Accessed at: <https://www.securitepublique.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/pblc-rprt-trrrsm-thrt-cnd-2018/pblc-rprt-trrrsm-thrt-cnd-2018-en.pdf>
- Thompson, Sara & Sandra Bucerius. (2020). “When ‘Soft Security’ is Smart: On the Importance of Building Strong Police-Community Relationships in the Context of National Security.” Pp. 283-306 In Littlewood, Jez, Lorne Dawson & Sara K. Thompson. (Eds.) *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Thompson, Sara & Elisabeth Leroux. (2020). *Final Report: Design and Performance: Developing Canadian Partnerships for Countering Violent Extremism*. Prepared for Public Safety Canada. August. 204 pages.