

An inside look at the first US domestic deradicalization program



IVY KAPLAN FEBRUARY 12, 2019

Following an [increase](#) in the number of foreign and domestic extremists entering the U.S. criminal justice system over the past two decades, the Minnesota “Terrorism Disengagement and Deradicalization Program,” a model that is the first-of-its kind in the country, is now being put to use.

The program was [created](#) in 2016 after U.S. District Judge Michael J. Davis ordered four Minnesota men accused of plotting to join Islamic State to undergo evaluation by Daniel Koehler, the director of the German Institute on Radicalization and Deradicalization Studies (GIRDS), and to participate in programming to help them disengage from extremism as an alternative to serving prison time.

The program is led by the U.S. Probation Office for the District of Minnesota which contracts with GIRDS, as well as incorporates strategies from Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service of the United Kingdom.

The District’s programming supervises approximately 25 extremists on supervised release convicted of terrorism-related crimes, with 13 being jihadist and 12 white supremacists on average, former Minnesota Chief Federal Probation Officer Kevin Lowry told The Defense Post.

Deradicalization strategies

According to Lowry, upon entry into the program, participants undergo a forensic analysis to understand the specifics of their radicalization process, what their particular vulnerabilities were, and what issues have since arisen from their radicalization.

“We’ll identify underlying radicalization factors and then address them through a team approach using mentors, counselors, a number of other types of social services and a holistic approach,” Lowry said.

An individually tailored approach is then determined for each person because of the different ways they became involved in extremist ideology.

Chief U.S. District Judge John Tunheim told The Defense Post that a variety of techniques are used, including psychological testing and counseling, in addition to incorporating religious mentoring to replace the desire for involvement in extremist activities with positive involvement in one's faith since religion is often used as part of the effort to recruit foreign terrorist fighters.

A particular emphasis is also placed on community reintegration strategies in order to achieve a balance between public safety and rehabilitation, Tunheim said.

Tactics like strengthening family ties to ensure that participants have supportive environments to live in; working with them to set up further education, vocational training or employment plans to restore self-reliance; helping them develop new social networks to distance themselves from previously destructive influences; and having community mentors who are knowledgeable about Islam advise them during supervised release all play a role in achieving this goal.

Although not all of the participants in the programming are Muslim, program staff have not yet come across circumstances to specifically address religion with right wing, Christian extremists through mentorship. However, Tunheim said they "certainly are ready to provide that kind of mentoring" in the future if needed.

Although many deradicalization strategies have been tested and documented around the world, Joana Cook, a senior research fellow at the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation, has found that those that focus on an individual's particular radicalization circumstances are more likely to succeed.

Even though she has not focused specifically on Minnesota's programming in her research, its individualized approach mirrors other successful deradicalization programs she has encountered in the past.

"Radicalization processes at an individual level are extremely complex – the factors that may cause a teenage male to join a far right extremist group are going to be very distinct to those that may motivate a mother to take her children to join ISIS," Cook told The Defense Post. "The most successful programs are those that can take into account, and respond adequately to, the widest array of factors that led to that individuals radicalization in the first place."

Program successes

Although the program is unique in that it is the first of its kind in the U.S., Lowry said that measuring success in extremism cases is fairly similar to measuring success in other types of criminal cases.

"We have measures along the way through the course of supervision," Lowry said. "Did they complete treatment? Are they in full compliance with the conditions of supervision? Have they had violations that resulted in them being sanctioned or returned for an additional term of incarceration and then coming out again to complete supervision?"

Once the program has had additional time to run, Tunheim said it will also likely be evaluated in its entirety, “both objectively and subjectively,” to make sure that the right goals are being achieved.

“Ultimately, the goal is to reintegrate these people into the community as productive citizens, and if you do that then the program is successful,” Tunheim said. “If they go astray and commit these types of crimes again then we’ll know that the program isn’t very successful.”

Prison radicalisation

Because of its status as the first domestic deradicalization program in the U.S., a lack of available models to emulate was one of the biggest problems creators encountered.

For Tunheim, the lack of prior deradicalization programs highlights a larger national issue where resources are focused on incarceration instead of rehabilitation and reintegration.

“A frustration of ours, which I hope is being remedied ... is that the Bureau of Prisons does not have any deradicalization programs, and in fact, you can argue that there’s potential for radicalization within the prison system because they’re really not looking at this issue.”

Examples of radicalization taking place within prison walls are not hard to find, not only in the U.S. but around the world.

Countries like [France](#) and [Egypt](#), which have recently faced a major problem of petty criminals becoming jihadis in prisons, have begun turning to strategies such as creating designated “isolation zones” within prison complexes for radicalized inmates to stop the spread of extremist ideology.

Prison gangs, criminal organizations that originate within the U.S. penal system itself and are often structured along racial, ethnic or ideological lines, offer opportunities for radicalization among prisoners to take place as well. Prominent examples include white supremacist groups like the Aryan Brotherhood, skinheads, Aryan Nation, and the Ku Klux Klan; criminal organizations like La Cosa Nostra and drug cartels; street gangs like the Mexican Mafia; biker groups like Hells Angels, as well as a variety of Bloods and Crips, according to [research](#) produced by Lowry in the Journal for Deradicalization.

As [documented](#) in past research by the National Institute of Justice, because many prisoners seek to adopt a new identity and a sense of camaraderie upon entering the prison system, prison gangs commonly offer respite for new prisoners. Especially by presenting potential members with a strict hierarchy, a code of conduct and a secret communication system to adhere to, the indoctrination into prison gangs is often linked to radicalization within prison walls, the research found.

“You have to work very hard when you’re in prison to better yourself and many do,” Tunheim said. “But a lot of people don’t and the presence of radicalized individuals in prisons means that there is a clear risk of other people becoming radicalized.”

Current work within the realm of education and prevention is also lacking, according to Lowry, contributing to growing numbers of extremists in the U.S. until these topics are addressed.

“The Minnesota Justice System Model and our approach is one of the primary ones in the country, but the problem with that is it starts at the time of arrest,” Lowry said. “It doesn’t start at education or prevention for people who have been exposed.”

Getting outside agencies on board to provide counseling services and mentoring has proved challenging as well, especially considering the stigma that can come from working with terrorists.

“We’ve had difficulty because not everybody wants to necessarily be involved with working with terrorism-type cases,” Lowry said. “Some people have declined because they’re worried about controversy involved with terrorism or concerned about the safety of their other clients, counselors, facilities, legal liability, fear of negative media scrutiny.”

Deradicalization as an alternative to prison

According to Lowry and Tunheim, initiatives like Minnesota’s “Terrorism Disengagement and Deradicalization Program” are often preferable to incarceration for multiple reasons.

Not all extremists exhibit the same levels of commitment to terrorist groups, or the same levels of involvement in terrorist schemes. Therefore, some argue that a one size fits all approach that puts every offender behind bars is not appropriate.

“Not all of these cases are the same,” Lowry said. “You have people with very minor involvement that aren’t highly radicalized, that don’t need as much, but then on the other hand you have people on the far end of the scale that are highly radicalized and create a high risk to public safety.”

Deradicalization programming also offers people within the criminal justice system opportunities to better understand the motivations behind extremist crimes, an area that, according to Tunheim, remains fairly misunderstood.

“People sell drugs because they’re addicts or because they want to make a lot of money. They don’t sell drugs because they’re trying to serve a good cause,” Tunheim said. “People who are terrorists fundamentally see themselves as altruists that serve a good cause designed to achieve a greater good. So this self-righteous commitment, self-sacrifice issue is a difficult one to deal with.”

However, according to Cook, deradicalization programming doesn’t necessarily need to be mutually exclusive to criminal convictions.

“In cases where persons have been found guilty of criminal acts related to violent extremism, then deradicalization programs, whether in prison or following their release, can be useful for trying to prevent recidivism to violent extremism, which is certainly in the public interest,” Cook said.

Especially in states or cities with low rates of violent extremism, Cook added that integrating deradicalization elements into pre-existing prison programs, rather than as stand-alone ones, may be more financially and logistically viable.

Both Tunheim and Lowry encouraged future investment into deradicalization programming in the U.S. as opposed to “warehousing people for the rest of their lives,” in Tunheim’s words, as well as only focusing on these cases during worst case scenarios.

“I just think as a national system, we can keep moving forward,” Lowry said. “I think that there’s a lot of movement and traction around this issue when something bad happens, but when those issues grow cold, then people kind of lose their focus and things go to the wayside.”