There is no single pathway to violent extremism and so no single solution, but building credibility and trust is essential

In the UK, in the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings and attempted terror plots, the prevention of violent extremism has become a priority for policy makers. Muslim youth have been identified as particularly 'at risk' of engaging in violent extremism. Within this heightened security context the police play a key role in strategies designed to prevent violent extremism, sometimes working in partnership with other agencies, and, most importantly, working with Muslim communities. This research was designed to look at how the latter relationship works in practice, and what can be done to improve police-Muslim community relations. It finds that approaches work when police have a long-term commitment to the community, build trust, and are seen to be people of integrity. Yet there is always a tension between the police working as 'partners', and being seen as 'spies' feeding security information. As distinctions between the role of the police and the security services blur, this danger increases, and 'hard' security interventions into a community can easily destroy years of work building trust and mutual respect.

This research was carried out by Basia Spalek and her team, funded by the Religion and Society Programme, and building upon a previous grant. It was based on interviews and focus groups conducted in London and Birmingham. The team found that identifying vulnerability (risk of becoming involved with violent extremism) and engaging community members in this process, whilst also addressing the risks and needs of community members themselves, was a difficult balancing act. Encouraging agencies and staff across sectors to look for signs of such 'vulnerability' carries the inherent danger of stigmatizing Islamic beliefs and practices. There is also a danger that trust built up in neighbourhood policing is exploited as part of wider intelligence-gathering mechanisms.

Contrary to many stereotypes, the research also found that there are many roots into violence. 'Islamism' is by no means one thing, nor the single most important factor. A key element in 'radicalisation' is the belief that violence is a necessary effective mode of action, and that belief is likely to be influenced by popular images of what it is to be 'a man', from gang culture, movies and other 'secular' sources. Islamic justifications can be used by those who are seduced by the idea of violence, as well as being a motivator in its own right. Thus a multipathway model of how young people are 'radicalised' is needed, and with it a more nuanced approach to how to deal with violent extremism. Policing is necessarily undergoing a significant learning curve.

Lack of accountability to communities is an increasing problem with many counter-terrorism initiatives. This undermines trust and hence effective policing. This project finds that information-sharing is a key aspect of successful work, yet police officers are still grappling with which information to release and to whom. There is also

a wider social problem about a lack of understanding not only of Islam in particular, but religion in general. The common idea that religion and violence have some inherent connection is a factor in leading to misunderstanding and mistrust and counter-productive 'de-radicalisation' measures which stigmatise Islam in general. A better understanding of Islam, Muslim communities, and individual hopes and fears is an urgent wider task for British society.

The research prioritises the need for more work and information-sharing on effective community-based policing. There are lessons to be learned from other countries which have been dealing with the problem for far longer. The team has secured follow on funding for two international workshops to bring together experts with experience, and to develop a research hub for ongoing exchange.

Find out more...

- Access the project report:
  http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2011_04/1302685819_preventing-religio-political-extremism-spalek-april2011.pdf
- Read Basia and Laura's report from the first international meeting planning the development of their research hub:
  http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/police_community_engagement_and_counter_terrorism_developing_a_hub
- Read the report from the team's original Religion and Society funded project:
  http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2009_11/1258555474_Spalek_Summary_Report_2008.pdf

You might also be interested in...

- Reading about & listening to podcasts from Session 4 of the Religion and Society co-organised event on Faith and Policy which focused upon Preventing Violent Extremism directly:
  http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/faith_and_policy_session_4_preventing_violent_extremism
- A day about Muslim youth and research organized by the Programme in Manchester on 12th November 2011:
  http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/young_british_and_muslim_academic_research_and_real_lives
- A website funded by Religion and Society designed to provide journalists and policy makers with access to high quality research related to the highly contested concept of 'radicalisation':
  http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/
- The UK Global Uncertainties Programme which this project has been identified as contributing to:
  http://www.globaluncertainties.org.uk/

Project Details

Award Title

A study exploring questions relating to the relationship between Police and Muslim Communities in the Prevention of Violent Extremism amongst Muslim Youth

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Forward Thinking

Youth Justice Board

Swagga

Phase II Small Grant

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