

VIOLENCE PREVENTION NETWORK



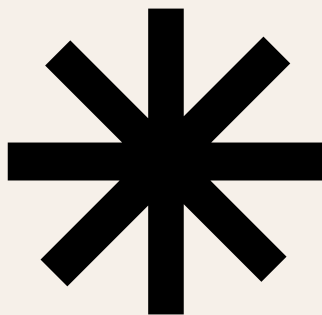
Extremism Prevention



Violence
Prevention Network



WE
TALK
TO
EXTRE
MISTS.
NOT
ABOUT
THEM.





DARE TO

PREVENT

A Plea

By *Judy Korn and Thomas Mücke*

Madrid, Oslo, Brussels, Sydney, Christchurch – unfortunately, the list goes on. Everyone immediately knows what these city names mean. They mean suffering, despair, and death for many people, because these city names stand for terrorist, extremist attacks on innocent people. It is irrelevant which extremist ideology is used to commit an attack. In any case, a terrorist act feels like a threat to those directly affected, as well as to those who are only indirectly involved and learn about an attack through the media, for example. It is also irrelevant that the number of attacks per year fluctuates greatly, increasing in one year and decreasing again in the next. The perceived threat is always there, suggesting that terrorist acts are on the rise and thus the danger to life and limb is increasing. So, what can we do to counter both the perceived and the real threat of extremist violence?

We don't give up on anyone

As one of the leading civil society organisations in the field of extremism prevention in Germany, which has been committed to the deradicalisation of extremist offenders for over two decades, we have a clear answer: prevention is needed to counter the threat. In addition to the security aspects associated with extremist attacks, prevention is the only sustainable solution. Prevention works at different stages and takes various forms. We refer to primary prevention when we work with workshops in schools or provide training for teachers, police, and prison staff. By providing young people with “basic immunisation” against attempts by extremist groups to recruit them, we protect them from drifting into extremist circles themselves. We sensitise professionals through training courses to recognise (young) people at risk in their environment so that they can offer them help.

As soon as there are grounds for suspicion or people are already at high risk, secondary prevention comes into play. We can help people who are in the process of radicalisation to escape the cycle of radicalisation through targeted training. We refer to tertiary prevention when a crime has already been committed and the perpetrator is in custody, for example. This is where we step in to prevent further crimes from being committed in the future. We don't give up on anyone.

Social diagnostics and risk assessment

In order to assess how far a person has progressed in the radicalisation process, we do not rely solely on our many years of practical experience. We also apply the scientific method of social diagnostics that we have developed. In contrast to risk assessment, which security agencies use to estimate

how much risk (e.g., of committing an attack) a person poses, social diagnostics analyses the socio-educational perspective of the distancing process. This involves accessing or developing social and emotional stabilisation resources that counteract violent behaviour and extremist thinking. These resources often also relate to a person's mental health. Extremism prevention is at the interface between psychotherapeutic measures and deradicalisation measures, linking the two in a meaningful way.

More prevention = more democracy

Prevention is the most important tool we have to tackle extremist violence, protect our democracy, and make an effective contribution to identifying and addressing radicalised individuals at an early stage. At the same time, tertiary prevention in particular saves high follow-up costs and is therefore the method of choice, also from a budgetary point of view. What is

needed from politicians is the courage to dare to do more (tertiary) prevention rather than less.

In view of the ongoing polarisation of society and the hostility towards the work of civil society organisations, cutting funding in this area sends the wrong signal. Extremism is one of the greatest threats to democracy, and we must work together to ensure that the ever-growing global crises do not further divide our community of values. Prevention can achieve a great deal - politicians can create the conditions necessary to enable prevention and foster social cohesion that counteracts further polarisation and thus extremist acts.

OUR MISSION -
OUR VISION

01



We talk to extremists - not about them

By *Benedikt Büchsenschütz*

The latest nationwide statistics published in May 2025 reveal a worrying trend: politically motivated crime in Germany rose by 40.2 percent in 2024 according to the Bundeskriminalamt [Federal Criminal Police Office] ([Bundeskriminalamt](#) 2025). This constitutes the sharpest increase since the introduction of systematic reporting in 2001. Over the past ten years, the number of such offences has more than doubled, with violent attacks reaching their highest level since 2016. While reporting sensitivity and increased awareness may contribute to this effect, the rise remains notable and alarming. Right-wing motivated crimes account for more than half of all registered cases, with a particularly steep rise in propaganda offences and a notable increase in violent incidents. Antisemitic crimes rose by over 20 percent, and the effects of the Middle East conflict were reflected in an

additional 7,328 reported incidents. The 2024 "super election year" also left a visible mark, with nearly 12,000 offences linked to electoral events.

These figures point not only to a growing security challenge but also to deeper social tensions. Many of these developments are rooted in polarisation, disillusionment, and identity-based grievances that particularly affect young people. In an environment marked by social fragmentation and global instability, radical ideologies offer seemingly simple answers and a sense of belonging.

To address these underlying dynamics, it is crucial for the state to further expand the focus of security strategies. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies play an essential role in identifying threats, enforcing the law, and protecting the public. Their tools and expertise are indispen-

sable, especially in acute and high-risk scenarios. However, these instruments alone are not designed to engage with the complex personal, psychological, and social factors that drive individuals toward extremist worldviews and violent action.

This is where tertiary prevention and disengagement work must be recognised as integral components of a comprehensive and forward-looking security architecture. Social work-based approaches, such as structured casework, long-term relationship-building, and context-sensitive social diagnostics, provide access to individuals and environments that are often beyond the reach of state authorities. Civil society actors can intervene where law enforcement reaches its limits, not by replacing risk-assessment-based approaches, but by complementing and extending its scope by focusing on building individual's

resilience and resistance against violence-enhancing rhetoric.

Over the past two decades, Violence Prevention Network has supported thousands of individuals across ideological backgrounds. In extreme cases this has meant dissuading people from traveling to jihadist conflict zones and enabling exits from violent neo-Nazi groups. We work with people of all ages, with a particular focus on youth. Our interventions extend into prisons, where we support inmates in distancing from extremist ideologies and prepare them for reintegration. At the same time, we train so-called multipliers engaged in youth work, education, and/or the prison and law enforcement system to strengthen democratic resilience and expand the reach of prevention efforts. This dual approach based on direct intervention on the one hand and systemic capacity-building

on the other hand, makes Violence Prevention Network a key partner in tackling radicalisation where it takes root.

What sets Violence Prevention Network apart is its role as a civil society organisation with offices based throughout Germany. Clients perceive such a structure as neutral and trustworthy. They often encounter counsellors with initial scepticism but rarely view them as a threat. This perceived independence and neutrality enables a working relationship that is often not possible for state security agencies. Due to their executive authority and clients' prior experiences with law enforcement, state actors can be frequently met with resistance or distrust. Many individuals potentially view them not as helpers but as instruments of state control, which can limit the depth and honesty of engagement.

In contrast, CSOs like Violence Prevention Network can offer a relational space that balances professionalism with approachability. We build trust over time, address individual needs and motivations, and create tailored interventions that meet people where they are without triggering defensive reactions or fear of repression. This unique access is not only a strength of civil society, but a necessary complement to state-led prevention and security efforts. Over the years, cooperation between civil society actors like Violence Prevention Network and state institutions in Germany has proven both constructive and reliable. This partnership has shown that sustainable prevention of extremism and political violence is most effective when competencies are shared and coordinated across institutional boundaries. Going forward, it is essential that this cooperation not only continues, but is mean-

fully strengthened.

Disengagement programmes and tertiary prevention must remain integral components of national and regional security strategies. Their long-term impact and field-based insights make them an indispensable part of a comprehensive approach to security. Civil society organisations contribute a unique perspective by working directly with individuals who are already part of extremist environments or at risk of reoffending. These people cannot be “forgotten” and declared “forlorn” in a democratic society that aims to include and enable its citizens to contribute to society. Civil society makes targeted, person-centred interventions possible that go beyond ideological confrontation and engage with the lived realities of clients. This approach is crucial for initiating change and preventing future acts of violence.

In light of current developments, the upcoming funding programmes must continue to support these approaches. Sustainable impact in this field requires continuity, trust-based relationships, and long-term engagement. Speaking directly with extremists, understanding their backgrounds and motivations, and influencing their social contexts is not a peripheral task. It is a core element of effective violence prevention. Over the past two decades, Violence Prevention Network has shown that this approach works and not only in isolated cases, but as a scalable, structured and impact-driven model. The experience built in Germany is increasingly recognised beyond its borders. With our needs-based assessment approach based on Social Diagnostics, which we could transfer to the United States, New Zealand and Australia and our learning-oriented organisational structure, our methodo-

logy has started to gain traction internationally. In international contexts too, stakeholders have responded positively to the combination of practical case-work expertise, deep contextual knowledge, and a human-centred ethos.

What makes this model transferable is its core principle: we talk to extremists - not about them. That perspective shift, engaging with people, rather than managing them, is key to unlocking meaningful change. If governments are serious about tackling radicalisation and political violence in the long term, they must invest in strategies that go beyond control and surveillance. Violence Prevention Network's work shows that civil society-led prevention is not just complementary but remains essential.

COUNTERING
NEW ONLINE
THREATS

02



Collaborative Interventions and Cross-Sector Solutions

By Jonathan Russell

Violence Prevention Network is best known for supporting the disengagement of over 5,000 radicalised individuals in Germany's prisons (by 2025) and delivering targeted prevention interventions to many more at-risk individuals outside of prisons.

This work is effective because it is targeted. It allows us to fully understand our target audience, and personalise the interventions to them, without the risk of reaching a general population. This work can be targeted because we have worked with the German government to build structures in partnership with many different institutions and stakeholder groups: educators, law enforcement, healthcare, the prison estate. These professions are important – they understand the target audience and have the opportunity to intervene. They're motivated to safeguard

them. And with our help, they can develop the capability to do so.

So, we develop robust referral mechanisms, understanding both the target audience, their experiences of radicalisation, and these stakeholders. And we have trained a vast number of first-line workers in these professions, who are active bystanders: they now know how to spot the signs of radicalisation and make referrals through to our services.

At that point, our 100+ practitioners – social workers, political scientists, psychologists, Islamic studies scholars, theologians, psychotherapists – take over and do their thing. And it works. We reduce reoffending; we reduce the violent threat to society; and we support individuals to become engaged, members of their communities.

But here's the problem: Radicalisation chiefly happens online now. And these institutions and first-line professionals? They're not online. There's a dramatic and widening gap between the digital native and the digital naïve. So where are the active bystanders online? And where are the referral mechanisms?

Trust and Safety teams at tech platforms as important players

The answer is Trust and Safety teams at tech platforms, and the AI systems that underpin them. These teams and systems are set up to understand the target audience. They collect a vast amount of behavioural data, which, if interrogated properly, can similarly identify the warning signs of radicalisation, or indicators of propensity to violence. This enables precision targeting of the same target audience that we support at scale

offline.

But at the moment, they don't use this data in this way. On the one hand, they use this data to make a small number of reports to law enforcement agencies when these individuals indicate illegal behaviour or imminent threat to life. And on the other hand, they use this data to make a large number of content moderation decisions to remove content which violates their platform's terms of service; and deplatform users who repeatedly violate their terms of service.

There is a huge gap between these two uses. And that gap should be filled by interventions where the goal is prevention. Prevention of escalation to violence when early warning signs are present. And prevention of further on-platform violations of terms of service. To fill this gap,

we have created Diversions.

Diversions is the ultimate answer to online prevention of extremist use of the Internet

Diversions supports platforms to consult with experts to design these prevention interventions on three behavioural aspects, by:

- determining the right on-platform behavioural signals that should indicate inclusion within the target audience
- designing the right tech and behaviour change communications interventions
- bridging these to off-platform programming to enable long-term behaviour change support, such as that provided by Violence Prevention Network

But why should platforms be motivated to do this?

Safety: This helps them achieve their core safety goals, of reducing harm on their platforms.

Trust: This improves the health of the ecosystems on their platforms, ensuring their users have a better experience. And they can publicise their work with this approach.

Commercially: This reduces the need for negative actions like law enforcement reporting, content moderation, or user enforcement, which can save money, and keep users on platform for longer.

Regulatory: This helps demonstrate proactive engagement with risk assessment guidance in the Digital Services Act and Online Safety Act.

Morally: This uses their data for good, in a way that they are uniquely positioned to do, contributes to the broader counter-terrorism landscape, and protect children.

And are they motivated to do this?

At a working level, trust and safety teams have called for this. But they don't always feel they have the backing of their leadership and cross-functional networks to innovate in this way. They have called for Violence Prevention Network to provide external support to create a playbook for prevention interventions, which we are now doing. This will help elicit public commitments from senior leaders and enable inclusion in future roadmaps.

Trust and safety teams have asked us to demonstrate an e-

valuation framework so that on-platform metrics, and off-platform behaviour change data and can quantify the impact of this approach. We are now doing this through a series of pilots with several partner platforms and in several different locations globally.

And we have found that some platforms are keener to try this with jihadist audiences; others with young audiences; others see the validity in this bridging their terrorism, child safety, and suicide harm teams; others are specific about the locations where they are interested in pursuing this.

And through consultation, we have understood some tech platforms' barriers to adoption of these approaches, which we have now addressed.

With this, can you imagine a future where prevention interventions and deradicalisation / disengagement support are available to all those whose online behaviours indicate propensity to violence? And where all tech platforms have an additional tool in their toolbox to keep their users safe online? We can.

PRACTICE AND
RESEARCH
HAND IN HAND

03



A clear compass for effective extremism prevention

By Svetla Koynova

Extremism prevention and disengagement work have always been dynamic. Unlike in many other policy areas, the most pressing challenges here do not change over decades, but sometimes within a matter of months. And when global events and crises seem to throw everything into disarray, new challenges can become a threat to public safety within a matter of weeks.

Extremist actors constantly incorporate these events into their interpretations of the world when they want to persuade others. This shifts ideologies and creates new narrative connections. Through constantly new myths, extremists try to reflect the concerns and obsessions of those who receive and spread these myths. Technological developments are also changing how people encounter and disseminate these extremist ideas.

Those who first notice these shifts are rarely academics or political decision-makers. They are practitioners: counsellors, social workers, leaders of exit programmes. In their conversations, in the crises they respond to, new trends become visible, often years before they are widely recognised. If you want to know where extremist ideologies are heading, you have to look at the practice. It is the lens through which society can see the front line.

The front line is becoming increasingly complex

Polarisation is increasing and creating deeper rifts in society and families. The danger posed by so-called lone actors, who act without any discernible group affiliation, makes prevention increasingly difficult. Young people are becoming radicalised earlier, often before their adult iden-

ties are fully formed. And they are doing so in spaces that are increasingly invisible: in closed online forums, algorithmically controlled feeds, on gaming platforms.

This is exacerbated by the fact that many children and young people have missed out on key stages of socialisation during the pandemic or have experienced them in an unfamiliar order. They do not have a sufficiently strong sense of belonging and pay for this with a lack of self-confidence and a tendency towards isolation.

These processes are not only hidden, they are also hybrid. The ideologies that young people latch onto are eclectic. They mix conspiracy narratives, ethno-nationalism, misogyny and even pseudo-spiritual promises of resurrection. This makes the "bogeyman" more diffuse than ever.

What does this mean for prevention?

It means that superficial awareness campaigns are not enough. We must intervene in the spiral of isolation and loneliness before it leads to violence. In secondary and tertiary prevention, in the phase where risks are real and people find themselves on the margins of society, we must offer alternatives. And that alternative is human connection. The relationship with a counsellor who listens without prejudice. The presence of a social worker who recognises the person behind the ideology.

But knowing that human connection is crucial is not enough. We need to understand how it can be built, where it is most urgently needed, and why some interventions work, and others do not. This is precisely the role of applied research.

Research as a compass

Applied, practical research provides the compass that prevention needs – in three directions:

At the societal level, it shows us the larger structures that fuel radicalisation: discrimination, economic exclusion, digital subcultures, cultural alienation. Without this bird's-eye view, we are fighting symptoms, not causes.

At the individual level, it helps us understand why one young person ignores extremist content while another watches longer and delves deeper. Knowledge of these micro-dynamics enables practitioners to make counselling more empathetic and thus more targeted and effective.

In a feedback loop, research ensures that insights flow in both directions: practice informs research, research strengthens practice. In this way, we prevent prevention work from becoming rigid. It remains adaptable to ever-changing ideologies.

More practical, not detached

For some, research sounds abstract, like an ivory tower, not like the reality on the ground. But in the field of extremism prevention, research is not a luxury. It makes practice sharper, more effective, more human. It transforms compassion into strategy and strategy into measurable impact.

Within Violence Prevention Network, this positive feedback is repeatedly used to support internal quality assurance, evaluation and learning. Insights into

major social shifts play a fundamental role in the encounter between counsellor and client. Thanks to social diagnostics, the insights gained are fed back to the organisational level, where knowledge can circulate. This structure reflects exactly what prevention itself must achieve: zooming out to recognise patterns; zooming in to see the individual; and feeding the insights gained back into practice.

Since 2017, Violence Prevention Network has had its own research team that closely links practice and research. Our goal is not only to observe the dynamics of the field, but also to actively shape it: to provide scientific support for programmes, develop new approaches and quickly incorporate current research findings into our work with clients. In doing so, we rely on three pillars:

Ensuring quality

We evaluate internal processes, further develop diagnostics and case management, and ensure that our practice always remains up to date with the latest scientific findings.

Creating knowledge

As a partner in research projects, we contribute our practical experience to foster collaborations with universities and institutes, while at the same time feeding the most pressing questions from our work with those affected directly back into research.

Strengthening dialogue

We create spaces for exchange between practice, research and administration: workshops, training courses, joint reflection. This gives rise to understanding, new ideas and sustainable networks.

In an age of hybrid ideologies and invisible radicalisation, research is not optional. It is the torch in the dark corridor. It shows us not only where people have strayed, but also the paths they can take to find their way back. In this way, research and prevention go hand in hand.

THIS IS



HOW I

ESCAPE



REALITY

Secondary



DO I FIGHT TO EXIST?

OR EXIST TO FIGHT?



Prevention

Tertiary



GET ME
OUT OF
HERE

Prevention

GET IN TOUCH

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