

# Do Home-based Social Work Services Increase the Success of Programming to Prevent Violent Extremism: Evidence from a Small-scale Intervention in an Urban East African Population

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## ABSTRACT

**Intervention:** Adolescents who were identified as at risk for recruitment into Al-Shabaab or a similar violent extremist group were invited to participate in a 3-month youth leadership program at a large urban mosque in an East African city. The neighborhood had been identified by stakeholders as a location where Al-Shabaab is actively involved in the recruitment and radicalization of youth. **Methodology:** Participants in an intervention to prevent violent extremism were evaluated to determine if the inclusion of home-based social work services increased the likelihood that adolescents would (1) complete the intervention program, and (2) opt for a post-intervention life that did not include violent extremism. Data from baseline (program intake), intervention completion (3 months after baseline), and 9-month post-intervention (12 months after baseline) were examined. **Findings:** A moderately positive relationship was found between receiving social work services and participating in group intervention activities. In addition, support was found for a positive correlation between receiving social work services and choosing not to join Al-Shabaab or another violent extremist group at 12 months. This research provides a small, but important contribution to the nascent body of empirical research on efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism.

**Key words:** Countering violent extremism, home-based social work services, positive youth development, secondary prevention

## INTRODUCTION

With the rise of terrorism across the globe, policymakers have found it increasingly important to invest in interventions that counter violent extremism (CVE) through micro-, mezzo-, or macro-level interventions.<sup>[1,2]</sup> This study examines one such intervention with young people living in a large East African city to determine if the addition of home-based social work services to a traditional psychoeducational group-based intervention would increase the program's success. Few studies have been conducted using empirical evidence to determine the outcomes of CVE programs.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, this research contributes

to a nascent body of literature examining the evidence base of such interventions.

### Background

CVE programs are proactive attempts to counter the efforts extremist efforts to radicalize, recruit, train, and/or mobilize the population.<sup>[4]</sup> At their core, CVE activities are only successful if they address the circumstances which increase an individuals' or groups' risk of radicalization and/or if they increase the protective factors that prevent individuals from recruitment and radicalization by violent extremists.<sup>[5]</sup> CVE programming is typically integrated into existing programs related to public safety, health,

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community or youth development, education, and violence prevention.<sup>[6]</sup> In post-conflict societies, such efforts may take place side by side with, or in active collaboration with, efforts at demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of armed groups.

The content of CVE programming and its target population varies widely. Macro-level interventions often focus on policy, public opinion, and addressing systemic conditions that increase the risk of joining groups, such as discrimination or unemployment. On the other hand, micro- and mezzo-level interventions may focus on mediating local conflicts between armed groups, neighborhood-based problems with police or security forces, increasing resilience, or addressing the mental health impacts of trauma, and increasing individual capacity for coping with difficult circumstances. Local, regional, and national stakeholders often have a great influence on the content and target populations for CVE interventions.<sup>[7]</sup> When, for instance, civil society organizations are heavily invested in CVE efforts, the programs may include a greater focus on business creation, job skills, and participation in the democratic process or community engagement such voting or voluntary charity service.<sup>[8]</sup>

In this case, the primary intervention content was delivered in group sessions over a 3-month period. Participants were urban-dwelling youngsters who were referred by community members or CVE staff based on assumptions of their risk for joining the terror group Al-Shabaab. Reasons for referral typically included school refusal, being involved in low-level criminal activity such as theft of unattended items of small value, and lack of engagement in positive peer activities. The intervention was delivered through the madrasa of a large inner-city mosque as an after-school enrichment program to teach leadership skills to youth. The philosophy of the intervention focused on positive youth development with the goal of increasing pro-social behaviors in general and decreasing specific risk factors including lack of employment and disengagement in education.

A secondary intervention providing home-based social work services on the individual level was implemented with 60 of the 113 program participants. Due to funding constraints, this intervention was limited in scope and duration to only the 3 months during which the youth was enrolled in the primary intervention. Home-based social work services are typically delivered by a university-trained social worker who is qualified to address the social and mental health needs of a client and their family.<sup>[9]</sup> Although it is referred to as home-based, this type of social work is an intervention that takes place in a location other than the social work agency or a single other institution. Such social workers meet the young person at their home, school, or in the community with the

hopes that seeing the child in their typical environment will assist in the process of assessing and addressing problems that interfere with the child's well-being. Individual social workers use a variety of models and theories to engage the young person and/or their family.

Home-based social work services have been empirically supported as cost effective, efficient, and successful in supporting larger program outcomes.<sup>[10-12]</sup> Home-based services may include individual or family therapy, the provision of social support, case management, advocacy, and the teaching or psycho-education of the client or client's family.<sup>[13,14]</sup> In this case, the social work services were typically delivered in the client's, home or the home of a relative or neighbor, though some participants were also seen at work, school, or in a community location such as at a madrasa or the local recreation center. The focus of the home-based social work services, in this case, was relatively narrow: Social workers addressed barriers that prevented the youth from participating in school or other education or vocational education programming and any barriers that prevented the child from fully engaging in the group intervention activities such as a parent withholding access to the activities as a form of punishment, the participant's conflicted emotions about the program, or simple a lack of transportation to activities.

## METHODOLOGY

Participants in two versions of a mosque-based intervention to prevent youth from joining the terror group Al-Shabaab were evaluated to determine if the inclusion of home-based social work services increased the likelihood that youngsters would (1) complete the intervention program and (2) opt for a post-intervention life that did not include violent extremism. Young people (aged 13-18 at intake) in a large East African city who were identified by community leaders and CVE program staff as being at risk of joining Al-Shabaab were recruited during 2017 and 2018 to participate in a youth development program held at the madrasa of a large inner-city mosque. The program included a variety of activities 5–6 days a week including field trips, organized recreational activities, voluntary community service, classes in religion and cultural issues, programming to increase participation in civil society and awareness of children's rights, health and hygiene training, job skills workshops, and a psycho-educational support group. Youth who participated in a minimum number of activities (at least 50 sessions) within the 3-month program formally graduated and received certificates in youth leadership at a community party and graduation ceremony.

Several months into the recruitment phase of the program, the implementing partner organization received a grant from a secondary source enabling the program to include

home-based social work services in addition to the group-based intervention. While young people who participated in the first cohort of the program received only group-based services, all young people recruited for the second and third cohort received home-based social work services in addition to the group activities. When funding for social work services ran out and the grant could not be renewed due to administrative and logistical concerns related to funding transfers, the fourth cohort of participants received no home-based social work services and instead received the typical schedule of group-based interventions.

This created the opportunity for a natural experiment to determine what impact, if any, the inclusion of home-based social work services had the program’s ability to meet its stated goal of decreasing the likelihood that youth would join Al-Shabaab or another violent extremist group. Participants who received social work services ( $n = 60$ ; 53.1% of the sample) were visited in their home at least once per week by a university-trained social worker who identified barriers to their completion of the program and possible solutions, linked and coordinated their access to community services, explored the child’s thoughts and feelings about the program and their life goals, mediated conflicts between the child and other family members, and assisted the child in accessing educational and health services.

Data collected at intake into the program, at 3 months (when the program activities were completed) and 9 months after program completion were examined to determine the relationship between home-based social work services and both program completion and program outcomes. A total of 113 children participated in the intervention, of whom slightly more than half ( $n = 60$ ) received home-based social work services. Participants ranged from 13 to 18 years of age at intake with a mean age of 15.38 years (standard deviation [SD]: 1.76 years). Most participants were male ( $n = 88$ ) and were not engaged in age-appropriate schooling or employment ( $n = 75$ ) at intake. All participants were from Muslim families, lived in the same geographic area of the

city (within 4 km of the program site), and spoke the same language.

## RESULTS

It was hypothesized that youngsters who received social work services were more likely to successfully complete the intervention. Participants were determined to have completed the intervention if they participated in 50 of the 65 activity sessions offered during a 90-day period. Youth only received credit for participating if they were physically present for at least 75% of the scheduled time of the activity and they participated without causing a disruption or violating rules (e.g., no fist fighting, no bad language or threats, use good manners, and treat books with respect). Information from program records was used to create an SPSS dataset with a variable for both successful program completion (nominal) and the number of program activities completed per participant. A second variable was created for those who completed 50 or more activities to indicate that they filled the requirements for graduation.

Youth who received social work services completed a mean of 52.42 sessions (SD: 10.99 sessions; range: 17–65 sessions) while those who did not receive social work services completed a mean of 44.70 sessions (SD: 16.17 sessions; range: 8–65 sessions) [Table 1]. A one-way analysis of variance demonstrated that these differences were statistically significant [Table 2]. The correlation between whether a youngster attended enough sessions to graduate and the social work intervention was moderately positively correlated [Table 3]. Therefore, it was determined that this hypothesis is correct: Youth who received social work services were more likely to complete the required number of sessions and graduate from the intervention program.

It was also assumed that graduating from the intervention program would prevent youngsters from joining Al-Shabaab or another violent group; therefore, it was hypothesized that if social work services increased the likelihood of graduation,

**Table 1: Mean number of sessions completed by participants who did and did not receive social work services**

Intervention group	Mean	<i>n</i>	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Received social work services	52.42	60	10.992	17	65
Did not receive social work services	44.70	53	16.172	8	65

**Table 2: Analysis of variance in the number of sessions completed between those who did and did not receive social work services**

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Eta	Eta-squared
Between groups	1676.565	1	1676.565	8.978	0.003	0.274	0.075
Within groups	20727.753	111	186.737				
Total	22404.319	112					

those who received such services would also be less likely to join a violent extremist group. At 9 months post-intervention, data were collected through follow-up interviews with participants and their family members. This was used to create a nominal variable indicating whether the youngster was involved in a terrorist organization or other violent group (including an armed identity-based gang).

A year after intake (9 months after the intervention ended), only ten youths had joined Al-Shabaab or another organized armed group (three of the 113 participants were lost to follow-up at this point in time). Of those who joined an extremist group, eight youths had not received social work services. Of the 60 youth who received home-based social work services, 96.7% ( $n = 58$ ) had not joined a violent extremist group during the 9 months after the program was completed compared to 84% ( $n = 42$ ) of the youth who received the group intervention with no additional social work services [Table 4]. This was examined using a Chi-square test, which indicated a statistically significant relationship between receiving social work services and not joining an armed group during the first 9 months after program completion [Table 5]. This indicates

that the hypothesis is correct: Youth who received social work services was less likely to join an armed extremist group than those who did not receive social work services.

## DISCUSSION

The United Nations has long argued that violent extremism is not spontaneous, and thus, efforts to prevent violent extremism (PVE) should address the circumstances that give rise to it in the first place.<sup>[15]</sup> PVE and CVE success has been associated with a focus on concrete problems, such as unemployment, which has measurable solutions.<sup>[16,17]</sup> In this case, the primary intervention was group-based and was designed to have an impact that was difficult to quantify and document; participating in group activities was intended to increase the employability of participants, their engagement in education, work, and/or civil society, their pro-social behaviors, and their psychological capacity for coping with adversity. However, for some participants, the primary intervention was supplemented by the secondary intervention of home-based social work services which had several concrete and easily measured goals including: Enrolling and re-engaging youngsters in school or age-appropriate work, assuring that youth participated fully in the primary intervention group sessions, and identifying/overcoming barriers to either of the first two goals.

Although the emphasis of education in CVE programming has been criticized by some as being culturally biased, it is clear that, in this case, the work of social workers to facilitate reintegration in education and work was well-received and contributed to the success of the program overall.<sup>[18]</sup> In this

**Table 3: Correlation between graduation and receiving social work services**

	Graduated
Received social work services	
Pearson correlation	0.307**
Sig. (one-tailed)	0.000
<i>n</i>	113

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

**Table 4: Cross-tabulation of membership in an armed group at 12 months for those who did or did not receive social work services**

Intervention outcome	Received social work services	Did not receive social work services	Total
Youth is a member of an armed group	3.3% ( $n=2$ )	16.0% ( $n=8$ )	9.1% ( $n=10$ )
Youth is not a member of an armed group	96.7% ( $n=58$ )	84.0% ( $n=42$ )	90.9% ( $n=100$ )

**Table 5: Tests of relationship between receiving social work services and membership in an armed group at 12 months**

	Value	df	Asymptotic significance (two-sided)	Exact sig. (two-sided)	Exact sig. (one-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	5.295 <sup>a</sup>	1	0.021		
Continuity correction <sup>b</sup>	3.873	1	0.049		
Likelihood ratio	5.516	1	0.019		
Fisher's exact test				0.041	0.024
Linear-by-linear association	5.247	1	0.022		
No of valid cases	110				

<sup>a</sup>1 cells (25.0%) have expected count <5. The minimum expected count is 4.55, <sup>b</sup>Computed only for a 2x2 table

particular cultural context, the focus of the social workers was in line with the cultural expectations of the population being served.

Like all research studies, this had some limitations. It was geographically and temporally limited to a particular circumstance, culture, political conflict, and population. While the participants in this intervention responded positively to home-based social work services, it is possible that in other circumstance or among people of other cultures, that such intervention would not be as well-received or would not be as successful in assisting participants in overcoming barriers to their completion of the program. In addition, the group that completed this intervention was relatively homogenous, speaking the same language, of the same religion, and from the same nationality. It is likely that this facilitated the social workers in addressing common problems without the distraction of constantly adapting to meet the diverse cultural needs of the individual participants.

The participants included both boys and girls. While males are most often associated with terrorism, female terrorists do exist. Women and girls play an active role in many extremist organizations, particularly in areas of recruitment. Gender may influence the character of a young person's engagement in the recruitment and radicalization process; it may also influence their perceptions of CVE efforts.<sup>[19]</sup> The limited scope of this research study did not include analysis that was differentiated by gender, so it is unknown what role gender differences played in the primary intervention of group-based activities or the secondary intervention of home-based social work services. Further research in this area is necessary.

Finally, this study did not examine the mechanism by which prevention was successful and by which individual-level changes took place in the lives of participants. Was the social work intervention successful because it helped participants overcome logistical barriers to participation in the group activities, such as transportation? Did the social workers increase family commitment to the group-based intervention? Or did the social workers help the youth learn important skills, such as how to make and keep friends, coping with trauma, or resiliency, that are tied to CVE success?<sup>[20-22]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, this study was able to make a small dent in the overwhelming need for empirical evidence to support PVE and CVE efforts. It demonstrated that home-based social work services can successfully be used to support and supplement a group-based intervention and that these services add something which was missing in the group-based aspect of the program. The increased engagement with the group-based activity sessions of social work service recipients demonstrated the need for such services to address barriers to

participation. It was also evident that not only were youngsters more involved if they received social work services but they were also less likely to join an extremist group in the 9 months after the intervention completed. Additional research is needed on the mechanisms by which home-based social work services can support efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism on the individual level.

## DECLARATIONS

This study was reviewed and authorized by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina Wilmington on October 16, 2019. The identification number for this study is 20-0094. The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author is solely responsible for the content and writing of this report.

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