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To cite this article: David P. Eisenman & Louise Flavahan (2017) Canaries in the coal mine: Interpersonal violence, gang violence, and violent extremism through a public health prevention lens, International Review of Psychiatry, 29:4, 341-349, DOI: 10.1080/09540261.2017.1343527

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2017.1343527

Published online: 14 Aug 2017.
Canaries in the coal mine: Interpersonal violence, gang violence, and violent extremism through a public health prevention lens

David P. Eisenman and Louise Flavahan

Division of General Internal Medicine and Health Services Research, David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA; Health and Medicine Division, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Washington DC, USA

ABSTRACT
This paper asks what programmes and policies for preventing violent extremism (also called ‘countering violent extremism’, or CVE) can learn from the public health violence prevention field. The general answer is that addressing violent extremism within the wider domain of public health violence prevention connects the effort to a relevant field of research, evidence-based policy and programming, and a broader population reach. This answer is reached by examining conceptual alignments between the two fields at both the case-level and the theoretical level. To address extremist violence within the wider reach of violence prevention, having a shared model is seen as a first step. The World Health Organization uses the social-ecological framework for assessing the risk and protective factors for violence and developing effective public-health based programmes. This study illustrates how this model has been used for gang violence prevention and explores overlaps between gang violence prevention and preventing violent extremism. Finally, it provides policy and programme recommendations to align CVE with public health violence prevention.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 February 2017
Revised 20 April 2017
Accepted 23 April 2017

KEYWORDS
Terrorism; extremism; violence; violence prevention; gang violence; public health

Introduction
Policy-makers and professionals working to prevent ideologically-motivated violence are turning to public health for frameworks and collaboration. Extremist violence has population-level health effects, as do the possible policy and programme responses (Boscarino, Adams, Figley, Galea, & Foa, 2006; Eisenman, et al., 2009). Public health approaches and professionals can help by convening and integrating the knowledge and participation of diverse communities and organizations, facilitating needs assessments and logical programme planning, identifying and adapting evidence-based programmes, and conducting and disseminating rigorous programme evaluations (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2017; Weine, Eisenman, Kinsler, Glik, & Polutnik, 2016).

When asking what a public health approach might look like we find an answer in the alignments between preventing violent extremism and the broader violence prevention field. This paper asks what preventing violent extremism (also called ‘countering violent extremism’, or CVE) can learn from the experience, knowledge, and successes of the violence prevention field. The general answer is that addressing violent extremism within the wider domain of public health violence prevention connects the effort to applicable theoretical frameworks, a relevant field of research, evidence-based programming, and broader population reach and resources. We focus on gang violence, a potentially comparable form of violence, to illustrate the successes and challenges of prevention models that are used across the field of violence prevention. With few empirical studies to draw from, the argument presented here is a conceptual one, and we provide evidence supporting it where it is available. Our goal is to align the field of CVE with the broader field of violence prevention in programme, policy, and research.

The case for a violence prevention approach
Recent terrorist cases illustrate how violent extremism may overlap with other forms of violence. Ahmad Khan Rahami, the 28 year old who planted bombs in New York City and New Jersey in 2016, was surrounded by violence—his own and his family’s.
was arrested in 2012 for violating a domestic violence restraining order. In 2014, he was arrested and charged with aggravated assault. He was again arrested and spent 2 months in jail in 2014 for stabbing his family. Rahami’s mother, Najiba Rahami, had been charged with child abuse in 2010 after inflicting corporal punishment on her 7-year-old child, according to court documents. Omar Mateen, who killed 49 and wounded 53 in an Orlando nightclub, reportedly beat his ex-wife, even holding her hostage at one point. Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, who drove a truck into crowds gathered for Bastille Day celebrations in the French city of Nice, killing 84, had a history of violence convictions for armed theft, domestic violence, and attacking a motorist after a traffic accident. Boston Marathon bomber, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, was arrested for domestic assault and battery of a woman. Colleen LaRose, a.k.a. ’Jihad Jane’, who was implicated in a plot to assassinate Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks, was a victim of physical and mental abuse in her youth, including repeated rapes by her own father. Dylann Roof lived in a family destroyed by domestic violence before he grew up and killed nine people in a church in Charleston, SC. As a child, years before he killed 14 people in San Bernardino, CA, Syed Rizwan Farook endured a home in which the children protected their mother from injury when the father, who was also often suicidal, assaulted her.

Research is sparse in the CVE field that systematically accounts for history of exposure to violence, whether as a victim or as a perpetrator. Gill, Horgan, and Deckert’s (2014) review of open source documents for 119 lone-actor terrorists, disclosed that 37.8% of their sample had ‘previously engaged in violent behaviour’. This likely under-estimates previous violence perpetration and victimization, since intra-family violence and other violence are greatly under-reported, especially in public documents. In an analysis of 71 terrorists, Horgan, Gill, Bouhana, Silver, and Corner (2016) reported that 57.5% had previous criminal convictions, although the proportion that was for violent offenses is not provided.

Nevertheless, the cases above reflect the violence prevention field at large, which finds the co-occurrence of violence perpetration: persons who commit one form of violence are more likely to commit other forms (Wilkins, Tsao, Hertz, Davis, & Klevens, 2014). Violence rarely is an isolated incident. Different types of violence, say violence in families and violence in communities, are linked in many important ways and share risk factors (WHO, 2008). Also, patterns of violence across the lifecycle recur in which victims of violence and trauma in childhood are at higher risk of violent behaviour in later life (WHO, 2008). As Paul Gill once said about Omar Mateen’s violence against his ex-wife, violence is, in a sense, a ‘learned psychological skill … Having a history of violence might help neutralize the natural barriers to committing violence’ (Taub, 2016). In this way, interpersonal violence, such as domestic violence for instance, maybe the ‘canary in the coal mine’, a precursor of further violence to come (Chemaly, 2016).

### Understanding violent extremism through a social ecological model

To address extremist violence within the wider reach of violence prevention, we see having a shared model as a first step. The social-ecological framework is a model that both the World Health Organization and US Centers for Disease Control use in violence prevention for assessing the problem and developing effective public-health based interventions.

The ecological model is based on evidence that no single factor can explain why some people or groups are at higher risk of interpersonal violence, while others are more protected from it. Instead, the model views interpersonal violence as the outcome of interaction among many factors at four levels: the individual, the relationship, the community, and the societal. In this model, the interaction between factors at the different levels is just as important as the influence of factors within a single level. For example, longitudinal studies suggest that complications associated with pregnancy and delivery (that is, individual risk factors that may lead to neurological damage and psychological or personality disorder) seem to predict violence during youth and young adulthood, mainly when they occur in combination with other problems within the family (a close relationship factor) such as poor parenting practices (Butchart, Phinney, Check, & Villaveces, 2004).

The four levels can be used to describe risk factors, protective factors, as well as strategies for programmes. Figure 1 presents the framework as a way to think about potential risk factors for violent extremism, and Figure 2 shows how it can be used to think about potential protective factors and prevention approaches. The social-ecological model has proven useful in violence prevention. Where violence researchers spent many years asking why some people became violent, and identifying the strongest risks factors, the ecological framework recognized that no single risk factor is sufficient, or even necessary, for violence to occur. Combinations of risk factors and pathways may converge to cause violence, and the
combinations may differ under different circumstances (Butchart et al., 2004).

The Individual Level of the model identifies biological and personal history factors that increase the risk for violent extremism. These might include factors that increase the likelihood of perpetrating ideologically-motivated violence such as age, mental illness, history of trauma, abuse and discrimination, grievances, and attitudes and beliefs that support violence (Bhui, Hicks, Lashley, & Jones, 2012). Interventions for individual-level influences are often designed to affect an individual’s social and cognitive skills and behaviour, and include approaches such as counselling and educational training sessions that support non-violence and encourage individuals to challenge violence and intolerance.

The Relationship Level examines close relationships that may increase the risk of perpetration. A person’s closest social circle—peers, partners, and family members—can shape an individual’s behaviour and influence the range of experiences that increase risk. Critical domains may include social bonds and marginalization (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, & van Egmond, 2015). Family characteristics producing feelings of schism between traditional culture and Western culture is one suggested factor increasing the risk of violence (Weine, 2012). Interventions at this level might include peer or bystander intervention skill development programmes that give persons the tools to change the climate of their social circles by rejecting or intervening when they hear or witness behaviours that support violence (Horgan, Williams, & Evans, 2015).

The Community Level examines the real-world environments, such as schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods, in which social relationships occur, and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with becoming perpetrators of violence. In one study, Al-Qaida inspired perpetrators lived in communities with higher unemployment rates and higher percentages of households living below the poverty level (Roberts, Fitzpatrick, Smith, & Damphousse, 2013), a finding supporting the theory that ‘place matters’. Interventions for community level influences are typically designed to impact the climate, systems, and policies in a given setting.

Finally, the Societal Level looks at the macro-level societal factors, such as domestic economic,
educational, health, and social policies, as well as global political, social, and military policies, that help create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited. This would also include religious and cultural beliefs, societal norms, and media influences that address violent extremism. Interventions at this level might include policies that reduce gaps and tensions between groups of people and strategies to reduce societal hostility that views Islam, migrants, and Muslims with suspicion.

Research in gang violence often applies a socio-ecological model to identifying risk factors related to gang matriculation and engaging in violent behaviour. Merrin, Hong, and Espelage’s (2015) study of over 17,000 US youths reported risk factors at multiple levels, including depression/suicidal ideation (individual level), family dysfunction, and gang-involved family (family level), and being bullied (peer level). Protective factors included a sense of belonging (school level) and adult support in the neighbourhood (neighbourhood level) (Merrin et al., 2015). The probability of gang involvement increases as the number of risk factors increases (Howell & Egley, 2005; Katz & Fox 2010; Lenzi et al., 2015).

Understanding violent extremism through a gang violence lens

A recent question is the link between what pulls youth to join gangs and what compels persons to violent extremism (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015). A large literature has studied the risk factors for gang membership, and reviewing it is beyond the scope of this paper. In comparison, the research on risk factors for extremist violence is in its infancy (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015). Risk drivers for violent extremism purported to overlap with gang membership drivers include social isolation or marginalization, the absence of adult support in the neighbourhood, a radicalized
social network, and transitional phases in youth development. According to a report from the US National Institute of Justice exploring lessons learned in violent extremism in Canada, the UK, and the US, preliminary research indicates that some common risk factors include having a family member, peer, or acquaintance involved in radicalization; adopting belief systems that accept or justify violence; and threats or perceived threats against the individual or the individual’s loved ones (United States, National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2015). Empirical evidence identifies similar risk-factors for gang membership, including having a peer or family member involved in a gang, cultural norms that are accepting of gang behaviour and violence; and feeling unsafe in the neighbourhood (Howell, 1998; United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Gang Center, 2017). Still, risk factors for gang membership vary depending on the study sample, and there is a similar absence of consistent and determinative risk factors for who perpetrates extremist violence (Bhui et al., 2012).

Only one study has directly examined whether gang involvement and support for violent extremism are distinct or co-occur in a community sample. Ellis et al. (2016) examined the relationship between gang involvement and openness to extremist violence among refugee Somali youths resettled in the US and Canada. Her latent profile analysis described five groups in relation to their attitudes and behaviours around gang involvement, delinquency, openness to violent extremism, civic engagement, and political engagement. No group had both high self-reported gang involvement and support for violent extremism. However, feeling marginalized from Somali and American society was associated with the groups marked by either gang involvement or support for violent extremism. Feeling discriminated against was higher in groups marked by either gang involvement or support for violent extremism. PTSD and high anxiety/depression scores were significantly higher in the group with high gang involvement than the groups with support for violent extremism. Although the study is limited by its non-random sample and cross-sectional nature, it does suggest that working to reduce social marginalization may help reduce gang violence and a susceptibility to extremist violence.

Preventing violent extremism using gang violence prevention models

CVE can learn from programmes preventing gang membership and gang violence. First, the challenges of gang violence prevention mirror current issues in the CVE field. Both fields grapple with the first step of a public health violence prevention approach, namely problem identification—what does it mean to be a violent extremist and who is a gang member? What defines ideological extremism and which youth groups are gangs? (Gebo, 2016). A recent report from Bullock and Tilley (2008) illustrates the problems encountered when a violence prevention programme is fielded without clear knowledge of the risk drivers. A UK-based programme aimed to reduce gang-related violence by reducing youth’s membership in gangs. The project sought to identify gang members and those at risk of becoming involved and then to offer them preventative and diversionary interventions. However, practitioners were unable to come up with clear criteria for being a gang member or at risk of becoming a gang member. As a result, the project identified over 10-times the number of eligible youth than it was planning to work with. Also, youth and parents felt stigmatized by the label of gang member. CVE programmes can take heed from this experience in gang violence prevention. Identifying which communities and individuals should be included in CVE programmes has been controversial, partly because there are no validated criteria for assessing risk of perpetrating extremist violence. CVE programmes that attempt to address the equivalent of gang membership or risk of gang membership, for instance support for extremist beliefs, may find themselves similarly overwhelmed and applying a stigmatizing label.

Successful gang violence prevention programmes operate across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of the ecological model, in recognition that it is the clustering and accrual of risk factors across the ecological model that increases the likelihood of violent behaviour, and multi-pronged approaches across levels of the model provide the greatest promise in reducing violent outcomes.

An exemplar programme is Cure Violence (Howell, 2010), which applies concepts of epidemiology and the social-ecological model to detect and interrupt conflicts. It identifies and intervenes with individuals who are at the highest risk for violent behaviour and it alters relationships and influences social norms that underlie the acceptance of violence within communities (Cure Violence, 2016). Although evaluations have found mixed support for positive intervention effects in some but not all neighbourhoods (Butts, Roman, Bostwick, & Porter, 2015), the model could prove useful for reducing extremist violence, given its potential
transferability. Additionally, Cure Violence is mindful of message delivery, employing former gang members as ‘Interrupters’, who are deployed into communities to deliver intervention and prevention programming. This component may prove useful in cases of violent extremism, given the cognitive biases and sense of community victimization present in individuals who are drawn to extreme ideologies.

Another model using a multi-pronged and tiered approach to gang-violence prevention is the Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) model developed in Los Angeles, CA. The GRYD approach includes primary and secondary prevention paired with targeted intervention. Primary prevention approaches included community-based efforts designed to build resistance to gang activities among community members, whereas secondary prevention efforts consist of youth- and family-based prevention methods targeted towards youths identified as being at the greatest risk of joining a gang. These efforts focus on attitude and behaviour change that, at the individual level, strengthen internal decision-making processes, while at the macro level, focus on altering the community’s attitudes that lead to a widespread acceptance or tolerance of violence. Risk is assessed using the Youth Service Eligibility Tool (YSET), itself derived from empirical data related to risk factors associated with gang membership in Los Angeles. Using the YSET assessment as a pre- and post-test, after 6 months of exposure to the programme over half of the youth identified as being at greatest risk no longer met the eligibility threshold. Additionally, although criminal gang activity decreased substantially throughout Los Angeles during the GRYD programme’s assessment, GRYD-targeted areas experienced higher aggregate declines in gang violence than comparison areas (Cahill et al., 2015; Dunworth et al., 2013).

Lessons learned from the GRYD-model are being shared with practitioners, researchers, policy-makers, and law enforcement personnel leading countering violent extremism programming in Jordan, Pakistan, Tunisia, East Africa, and Europe (Cespedes, 2015), as programmes embedding CVE in gang prevention are growing in the US, UK, and Canada (Johnson, 2015; Rhodan, 2015). The GRYD model provides other lessons for CVE. GRYD recognizes that mere gang membership is not a crime, rather it is the violent and criminal behaviour that flows from membership that breaks the law. Likewise, in the US-based context, radicalization is not criminal, but it is the violence rooted in radicalization that breaks the law and is a significant public health problem. It is likely that this violence-prevention-focused approach, partnered with GRYD’s conscious effort to delink from suppression-based police activities, engendered trust among the community-members and youth who were engaged in the program—in the same way that Cure Violence engendered trust through the use of Interrupters. The need for trust among community members is particularly important when dealing with marginalized or stigmatized communities—an important component to consider in the context of violent extremism, wherein pathways towards radicalization often include a feeling of community-victimization (Jensen & LaFree, 2016).

Finally, research efforts to better understand the links between gender-based/intimate-partner violence and gang violence (The Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles 2016) are underway—a connection that, as suggested in the terrorist cases above, exists to some degree in perpetrators of violent extremism. Empirical data validating and exploring this connection remains a need in both gang violence prevention and the prevention of violent extremism. It should be noted that similar community-based approaches focused on attitude and behaviour change have shown tremendous promise in reducing intimate-partner violence (Abramsky et al., 2016); efforts to prevent both forms of violence could possibly be integrated in future efforts. Those working in violent extremism should be aware of these efforts and perhaps seek to incorporate the findings of this work and related studies of violence prevention into their work.

**Recommendations**

There are likely many areas of overlap between preventing violent extremism and the broader violence prevention field. We discussed some of the overlaps focusing on the field of gang violence as an example. This includes possible overlaps in risk drivers, opportunities for prevention, and fundamental challenges for the fields. The overlaps also provide an opportunity for CVE to learn from the successes and challenges of this field. We provide the following recommendations for policies and programmes that prevent violent extremism based on the above analysis. While some of the recommendations are specific to the US, we believe they have global relevance.

1. When we reframe violent extremism as a violence prevention problem, it becomes clear that expertise in violence prevention should be at the table
when preventing extremist violence is the topic. Public health and criminal justice agencies are the two parts of government most impacted by violence, but public health is only sporadically a partner. The complex nature of violent extremism necessitates collaborative approaches to prevention and multi-sectoral solutions.

2. We recommend funding programmes within the broader field of violence prevention. This will allow CVE to connect to a rich set of research and programming that may surface alignments and facilitate learning. We need to understand and emphasize the common features and linkages between extremist violence and the other types of violence occurring in families, schools, and communities. Persons working on gangs, on prevention of family violence in immigrant communities, and on preventing violent extremism have varying areas of expertise and interest. Separating CVE out as one more field encourages a piecemeal approach to violence prevention. Lack of collaboration obscures the commonalities. In the US, violence prevention funding to public health has mostly come from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Supplementing these violence prevention funds with money for addressing violent extremism may mitigate the community distrust of CVE accompanying funding from security agencies such as the US Department of Homeland Security (Allam, 2017). It may avoid stigmatizing communities. Most importantly, incorporating violent extremism into existing violence prevention programmes rather than creating new programmes from scratch produces a broader population approach and makes better use of societal resources.

3. Funding is growing for CVE programmes, but communities have few experts to help guide them in this topic. The CDC should develop and field a cadre of on-call experts to provide technical assistance on both violence prevention and extremist violence to the new crop of community-based, violent extremism programmes. A model for this is the CDC-funded National Centers of Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention, which work with communities to implement broad-based strategies to reduce violence.

4. It is critical to fund and conduct research on the connectivity between other forms of violence and violent extremism. Research on violent extremism is generally conducted in isolation from other violence research. The scope and effectiveness of CVE programmes is likely to be enhanced if this fragmentation can be overcome. The social ecological model provides a framework for organizing the factors that put people at risk for or reduce risk of perpetrating violence (risk and protective factors) and the prevention strategies that can be used at each level to address these factors. Looking at the entire composite of individual, relationship, community and state factors that, when combined, correlate with violent extremism may provide us with new opportunities for prevention. Rather than looking for “abnormalities” in individuals, we might attempt to understand the interaction between the individual and the situation.

5. As with other forms of violence, we recommend multi-pronged approaches occurring across levels of the ecological model to preventing ideologically-motivated violence.

Conclusions
Programmes and policies for preventing violent extremism will benefit by applying theories, research, and best practices from disciplines beyond its traditionally dominant fields of political science, criminology, and psychology. From the growing interest in the contributions public health science and practice can make, we recommend focusing on the contributions that violence prevention science and practice may provide. We hypothesize that violent extremism shares common risk and protective factors with other forms of violence. We offer the social-ecological model as a framework for organizing this exploration and a shared and comparative research agenda. Looking for the commonalities between violent extremism and other forms of violence can lead to more theory-informed programmes to prevent violent extremism. Primary and secondary prevention efforts that are grounded in the ecological model could prove useful counterparts to more traditional criminal justice approaches to suppressing violent extremism. While risk factors may continue to converge and diverge between gang violence and ideologically-motivated violence as the evidence-base continues to grow, the methods and theoretical underpinnings, as described in the gang violence context here, are worthy of deeper exploration within a violent extremism context.
Our idea that violent extremism is more similar to than dissimilar from other common forms of violence represents a departure from current and historical ways in which violent extremism has been characterized. A key outcome of this proposition is it connects countering violent extremism programmes with public health-based violence prevention programmes. Creating awareness in the violence prevention field about how it may contribute will foster additional resources and capacities while embedding violent extremism in broad-based programmes at the local and national levels. Further empirical data is required to test our assumptions and inform theories and models of violent extremism prevention.

Disclosure statement
The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Funding
This work was supported by the Science and Technology Directorate, United States Department of Homeland Security [Cooperative Agreement 2015-ST-108-FRG006].

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