

RAN EX POST PAPER

The role of family and social networks in the rehabilitation of (violent) extremist and terrorist offenders

Introduction

How can the positive potential of family and social networks be harnessed in the rehabilitation of a terrorist offender when such connections are absent? This is one of the key questions for practitioners who seek to involve family in rehabilitation programmes. RAN P&P explored the challenges in using family and social networks around (violent) extremist and terrorist (VE/T) offenders as a resource for rehabilitation¹. The absence of family and social network, by coincidence or by choice, is one of the hardest challenges for practitioners, as it allows extremist groups to fill the gap in the offender's life. Other challenges include a vulnerable family system, the negative role of the media and difficulties in cooperation between prison, probation and family support services — where the latter exists. Although still in their infancy, different Member States have developed ways to work around these challenges, for example by using mentors and partner organisations to help rebuild a social network, or by extensive family therapy to deal with broken family bonds. This ex-post paper highlights the key challenges and responses. It targets prison, probation and family support professionals who want to develop or enhance their strategies and methods.

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¹ This paper uses the term (violent) extremist and terrorist offenders. This refers to: a) offenders not charged with terrorist crimes but vulnerable to violent extremism; b) violent extremist offenders, not charged with terrorist crimes but already radicalised and c) terrorist offenders (charged, convicted, post-release).

What we already know about family involvement and support

Family involvement and support in the prevention of radicalisation has been frequently discussed within RAN. The most important lessons and recommendations have been outlined in documents from the RAN working group on Youth, Families and Communities². The key insights are briefly summarised here, as they form the background/premise/preconditions to the challenges and responses discussed later in this paper.

Families of radicalising individuals can be perpetrators (actively promoting an extremist ideological mind-set and recruiting family members into terrorist organisations) as well as victims (not involved in extremist activities or adhering to extremist mindsets, but affected by this family member's associations). Both situations may exist within a family, making it more complex to harness their positive potential.

Because of these dynamics, it is important to look at the family as a system in which different parts affect each other and have an influence on the stability of the family as a whole. When working with families of radicalising individuals, a systemic approach is needed to ensure working with each of the family members has a positive effect on the system, and leads to a decrease in push and pull factors towards radicalisation³.

Effective family support is built on relationships of trust between the support provider and the family. Transparency is needed regarding the role of the family support provider and his/her link to other services such as other care providers, police and intelligence services. In many Member States (MSs) this means that family support providers agree with the family that they will share

confidential information with police and intelligence services when there is a safety risk, either to the individual, the family members, or the community.

Building trust is a long-term process and therefore family support interventions also need a long-term timeframe to be effective. It is important to provide family support in conjunction with other support services, such as welfare support, employment services and psychological support.

When it comes to family support for radicalising individuals, this type of intervention has been given less priority in Member States in comparison to, for example, ideological/ theological support. This means that practice in this area is still in an early phase of development. This is especially true for family involvement and support in the rehabilitation of VE/T offenders, which has led to RAN P&P exploring this topic more in-depth.

Challenges to family and social network involvement

This section addresses the specific challenges experienced by prison, probation and family support practitioners when working with families and social networks of VE/T offenders.

Assessing the role of the family and/or social network

As families and social networks can have a (partially) positive or (partially) negative influence on the rehabilitation process of offenders, assessment of their potential role must be a first step.

In many cases, significant information available about the family situation or social network relations of the offender is lacking. Intelligence services will usually not share what they know

² [Webpage on RAN Youth, Families and Communities](#)

³ [RAN paper on root causes of violent extremism](#)

with prison, probation or family support practitioners. Therefore, they need other sources, sometimes even the media, to create a picture of the family dynamics.

In some cases, the family deliberately withholds information to obstruct the criminal investigation into their relative (e.g. by removing sim cards from their phones). Sometimes the offender himself prohibits the family from cooperating or receiving support and the family obeys, thereby closing the connection to the family. Sometimes it is another family member who blocks access to rest of the family, which hampers the process of getting more information about the family.

Absence of family and/or social network

In order to have the family or social network play a positive role in rehabilitation, either a cooperative family, or cooperative individuals from the social network are needed, and they have to want to be involved. There is a group of VE/ T offenders, such as illegal asylum seekers, who do not have any family or social network to involve. They will form an easy target for extremist groups.

Extremist groups also have special prisoner support networks who provide financial and moral support during imprisonment, taking the place of family and friends in their absence. An example of such a group is 'Did you forget the Aseer' or 'Project A' who support Muslim terrorist offenders by writing letters, sending them money and offering support to their family (if they have one). These groups create a grip on the offender that stands in the way of disengagement. Much of this influencing process also happens online.

If there is a family and social network, there may still be reasons that hamper their active role in rehabilitation:

- There may be contact bans for terrorist offenders and particular members of their family;
- In several countries, those charged with and convicted of terrorist (related) crimes will go

on remand or be imprisoned in a central place (in France in the Paris region, in the United Kingdom in London), which is sometimes very far away from the family and social network. This creates a physical barrier to involvement in the rehabilitation process.

- The family and social network actively choose not to be involved because they are hurt, ashamed, angry or afraid.

Vulnerable family situations

When one or multiple family members are involved in extremist or terrorist offences, this always has a huge impact on the family situation and its stability. Most families are shocked by the fact that their relative is associated with these types of actions and feel uncertain because they might have missed signs indicating radicalisation. In many cases, they are not aware of the consequences of sentencing, they do not understand the difference between ideological conviction and crime, and they are not familiar with the administrative and judicial proceedings that will follow. For both the offenders and their families, a realistic view of life after the sentence might be lacking, and it is assumed that life can resume as before once the sentence has been served.

In addition to dealing with uncertainties, emotional strain, shame and grievances, families are traumatised by events such as police raids in their homes (in search of evidence), public humiliation and stigmatisation through media coverage. They may also be confronted with other pressures, including factors related to the offence, such as financial debts, extremist groups getting into contact with them, and negative contacts with members of their community.

In any case, the offender's departure from the family to serve prison time will have an effect on family dynamics and may change traditional family roles. For example, when a returning foreign fighter is charged and sentenced to prison, he might leave his wife and children behind. The

mother is now the sole care provider in the family and this can cause stress and vulnerabilities.

For some families returning from terrorist conflict zones, both parents are placed in prison and young children are placed in institutions, foster care or under guardianship of other family members. This has a huge effect on the family dynamics and upbringing of these children.

Some families are afraid of what will happen when the relative is released from prison and rejoins the family, especially if there are minors in the family.

Working with different services in the family system

Very often VE/T offenders come from families that can be considered as multi-problem families. These families usually get support from different (public) services who are not necessarily cooperating or sharing information. The broad range of stakeholders involved can include: intelligence services, police, child welfare, social welfare, employment agencies, local authorities, community organisations, probation, judicial agencies and prison.

Families have told family support providers in confidence that they are used by intelligence services to gather information to be used in the court case against their own child. These families think they are doing the right thing. Sometimes the offender only finds out in court that his parents/relatives have been working with the police. This creates tensions and problems in family relations.

During a prison sentence, the provision of family support it is often dependant on the specific prison and their perspective on family involvement. This causes difficulties for NGOs providing family support to VE/T offenders in different prisons.

To help the family, cooperation with other partners, such as NGOs, is often necessary. Finding

these partners, and in particular those who have experience with VE/T offenders, is difficult.

Lack of safety and limited professional capacity

Most EU Member States have a general shortage of prison and probation staff, as well as family support workers. This lack of capacity in itself forms a barrier to setting up family support for VE/T offenders and creating effective cooperation between services.

As prison and probation workers are often integrated within the public sector, they are usually protected by a fairly elaborate security system. For independent family support providers, this is usually not the case, which may make them more exposed to security risks (e.g. they may become target of extremist groups).

In addition, prison and probation professionals have greater access to information that can help them assess whether an individual poses a security risk. For independent family support providers, it is very difficult to assess such a risk (even though it might be present) and confidentiality agreements also create a barrier to sharing information.

When an offender lacks both family and social network, the support provider for the offender (e.g. a mentor) often has to take on this role during and after sentence. This can be an emotionally challenging position, and those providing this assistance need support.

Negative role of the media

As many VE/T offenders get media attention, the public character of these cases creates barriers to rehabilitation. In close to all cases, the coverage is negative and will have an influence on the offender and those associated with him or her. The 'terrorist' label is a hard one to shake off, which is necessary in order to create a new identity avoid being defined by the offence or the extremist mind-set.

These families are also often approached by researchers who want to study their case. Although perhaps for a good cause, these families are not always in a position or state of mind to take part in such activities as they are still trying to come to terms with and deal with the situation in which they have found themselves.

Did you know?

There are some differences across the board between family involvement and the type of extremism that the offender follows.

When it comes to right-wing extremism, the offender's family often shares the same opinions and the influence comes from the direct environment.

When it comes to converts to e.g. Islam, the families usually do not adhere to the extremist religious beliefs. They have difficulty understanding and coping with the different worldviews.

There are of course exceptions to these general rules.

Responses and promising practices

This section summarises the policy and practical responses being developed across the EU to deal with the aforementioned challenges, as well as promising practices.

Assessing the family

A first step towards gaining more insight and information about the family is to get in direct contact with them. Contacting them from a care and needs perspective (focusing on helping the family survive these difficult times), may open the door to understanding the family's role and relationship with the offender. This is best done by a well-trained and experienced family worker. It also provides an opportunity to observe the family's attitude and behaviour towards the offender. Below is a selection of behaviour

indicators provided by practitioners that may show whether the family has a predominantly positive or negative role:

Negative	Positive
Families are not able to put the child or relative's welfare above their own.	Open to accepting help.
They only want to work on interventions for their child/relative, but not for themselves.	Visit their child in prison.
They may concretely mention things that show they have been facilitating the offender's acts (whether consciously or not).	Acknowledge they are part of the problem.

Approaching the problem from the other direction, the offender him or herself may also be an important source of information (through talks with support professionals in prison). Or if communication with the services has to go through a family member, because of communication limitations, that family member can then become a source of information.

Building new social networks

Rebuilding a social network when one has the label of 'terrorist' is one of the hardest challenges during rehabilitation. Being drawn back in by extremist groups is an ever-present danger. Rehabilitation programmes, often overseen pre-trial and during parole by prison or by probation staff, include going to new places (sports- and leisure clubs, education, theatre) to meet new people and build a new network. Cooperation with service providers in these areas is a key element for success. The same applies to mentor programmes and organisations training mentors.

In some cases these mentors and the probation officer are the single social network that the offender has.

It is often up to the (ex) offender to what extent they are open about their past. Experience shows that some really want openness and to share their story to be able to prevent others from falling into the same trap. Others do not want to talk about it. In any case, the partner organisations should be aware of their past, but the offender should be under no obligation to talk about it.

Restoring healthy family dynamics

Dealing with vulnerabilities in the family and restoring family bonds takes time. Family support providers should be aware that different family members have different issues and dreams, and it is always challenging to balance these for the sake of a healthy family system. This is also necessary if the offender is not present because he/she is still in a terrorist conflict zone, or when he/she has been killed.

Multiple levels of support are possible:

1. *Providing information that helps the family to deal with stress resulting from insecurities:* this refers to information about the process of radicalisation, terrorist groups and recruiting tactics, terrorist offences, court proceedings, prison circumstances and so on.
2. *Helping the family maintain a positive relationship with the offender:* this is necessary to give the offender a sense of hope and belonging and to give the family tools (e.g. having children send letters and drawings) to show their support. Do not delegitimise the role of the parents in the eyes of the offender as family loyalty is a strong force for rehabilitation.

3. *Helping the family deal with other issues, including psychological challenges and mental illnesses.*

For concrete examples of this support, see the section on promising practices.

Cooperation between services

The cooperation between different organisations and services with the aim of preventing radicalisation or supporting disengagement is a recurring theme within RAN, and within the P&P working group.

Practitioners have shared the following methods to ensure cooperation and information sharing when involving families:

1. Establish information sharing protocols with police (and prison and probation if relevant) before going to the family as a support provider.
2. When there is a security risk, give the family the option to contact the police themselves.
3. Ensure support workers have colleagues with whom they can confidentially discuss cases, including their security risks (perhaps with guidance from security services).

Ensuring the health and safety of professionals

As previously mentioned, there is a significant difference between prison and probation staff on the one hand, and family support providers (who are usually not part of the organisational system) on the other. For prison and probation officers, most Member States have elaborate safety and security protocols. But support for the staff members working directly with terrorist offenders is also required to ensure their wellbeing. The Council of Europe handbook on radicalisation in prison provides a more detailed explanation of this⁴.

⁴ [Council of Europe handbook on radicalisation and violent extremism](#)

For family support providers, a safety net of other professionals to share difficult cases with, and a safety protocol to ensure their own security (use of fake names or first names only, having a separate mobile phone, not being mentioned in media or court reports) should be provided. Although in some cases it can be beneficial to have a family support provider from a similar cultural background as the family, in other cases this might not work because the family might be afraid that the support provider is linked to their community. This can lead to safety fears and a reluctance to share problems.

Dealing with media and researchers

To reduce negative media attention, family support providers could get in contact with journalists to explain the impact on the family of their articles and photos. Of course, they are not obliged to retract or adjust their work, but in some cases this human appeal does work. At the same time, families need training in how to deal with the media when confronted, and sometimes also how to avoid the media.

Some families proactively seek contact with media when, for example, they feel that the authorities are not paying enough attention to their case. In these situations it is important to explain to the families how the press and media work, and how their message might not be framed as they intend.

It is not advisable to take part in research in the middle of a rehabilitation process. Turning the personal story of the family into a case-study might be more appropriate once the family has regained some stability. This can even be a part of rehabilitation in terms of accepting the difficult times that the family has been through. In some cases, family support providers are also researchers themselves or have an understanding of research and are able to collect relevant data,

whilst providing support. This may be a less intrusive way of learning from these cases.

Promising practices

Victim Offender Mediation (VOM)

VOM or restorative justice approaches are relatively new to the VE/T offender field. They are intended to provide some emotional relief for both victim and offender by creating a safe environment for apology and explanation, and a safe environment to offer compensation for criminal damage caused. When there is an element of direct or indirect violence, VOM becomes more difficult. Experiments with the method in relation to terrorist offences have been carried out in Northern Ireland and in the Basque region.⁵

Parental responsibility focus

Exercising and addressing the parental responsibility of offenders is an important push factor for rehabilitation as it makes going back home after a sentence very important. In Finland, the programme '**Let's talk about children**' has been developed for use in all prisons, and is offered to all offenders. Although Finland currently has no convicted terrorist offenders, experiences in the **Dutch Terrorist Wing (TW)** support the theory that children are an important protective factor. This is one of the reasons why the TW has reduced security measures to allow more (physical) contact between children and their parent in the TW (if no high risk is apparent).

Social network conference (SNC)

Social network conferences are already in place for different types of offenders. The **Austrian probation service Neustart** uses this method for offenders below the age of 21 who have been

⁵ RAN P&P meeting in Barcelona, September 2015.
Report available upon request.

charged with/convicted of terrorism-related crimes. An SNC is ordered by the court, and the probation services receive an official request to implement this within two weeks. The client can also reject the SNC, but the chances of release are higher with SNC, and therefore they will often agree to participate.

The SNC is formed by 1) the professional network, 2) the offender's social/family network, and 3) the offender him/herself. The client decides who should be part of the social/family network)

The SNC rolls out in three steps:

1. Step 1: Everyone gathers in one room and the professionals explain the method of the SNC.
2. Step 2. Exclusive phase: professional network leaves the family network to work alone (very important that there is no expert inside). They design a rehabilitation plan.
3. Step 3: The professional network assists the presentation of the developed plan and checks whether its objectives are realistic. In most cases, some changes are made and the plan is sent to the court for approval.

There is no follow-up with the family after the SNC (not by social services); this is only foreseen during the first two weeks coordination support.

Life-story approach

In the French speaking part of Belgium, the '**Centre d'Aide et de Prise en charge de toute personne concernée par les Extrémismes et Radicalismes Violents**' (CAPREV) has been developed to work with all individuals confronted with or affected by radicalisation. CAPREV has wide-ranging services, amongst which is support for VE/T offenders and their family. When they work with offenders, they use the life-story approach to understand the background, family dynamics and protective factors for the offender and his/her environment. This analysis informs the development of a support and rehabilitation programme.

First-night support

In the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Services are developing a comprehensive **Desisting and Disengagement programme** for their TACT (offenders charged with/convicted of terrorist offenses), TACT-related and pathfinder (with a concern or vulnerability of radicalisation) offenders. Initiatives to involve the family are still in their infancy. The Lord Farmer review of the work being done in prisons highlighted the importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce inter-generational crime. One of the important recommendations that came from prisoners themselves, was to include family support from the first night in prison. This is usually a quite stressful event for offenders, and being able to talk with a family support professional to provide an understanding of the family dynamics and their possible role in rehabilitation at this point would make for good start..

Exchange between prison, probation and family support professionals

In many Member States, family involvement still needs to be set up. A first step is to raise awareness through exchanges between professionals involved with this target group. In Norway, five large meetings were organised for participants learn more about prison systems and train prisons on the importance and implementation of family support.

Family interviews

RIVE (research and intervention on violent extremism) is a department with a French NGO called APCARS (Association of Applied Criminal Policy and Social Reintegration). RIVE is a mentoring programme for probationers aged over 18 and either accused or convicted of terrorist acts, or identified by the probation services as radicalised, in pre- or post-sentencing. The objectives are disengagement from extremist violence, and social reintegration. The programme is implemented in an open environment,

complements the work of the probation service, and operates following a judicial decision. Contact with the family is also established and family interviews take place. Conducted by the team's psychiatrist (also a family therapist) and another member of the team, the interviews bring together the probationer, his or her parents and preferably all siblings. During these interviews, they seek to introduce or reintroduce dialogue in the family on:

- the process of radicalisation for the probationer;
- the terrorist act committed;
- the impact of the judicial process on the family.

Conclusions

Methods and practice to involve family and social networks in the rehabilitation of VE/T offenders are still at an early stage in most countries. In the development of these methods, the involvement of family gets priority, as this also seems to be the most logical starting point. However, the wider social network of friends and colleagues also deserves attention — this is much harder to replace but is still very much needed for successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

A wealth of practices seem to have been developed for involving families for other types of offenders. This is a comforting thought as these provide a basis to build upon when it comes to VE/T offenders. It is recommended that EU Member States use methods that already exist in their country, and that they experiment with VE/T offenders and adjust accordingly.

Experimenting will require investing in awareness-raising, especially in the prison sector, in relation to the importance and potential benefits of family and social network involvement with this target group.

But it is not only the prison and probation sector that needs to be involved. External partners and NGOs working outside the criminal justice system

that currently have little experience with VE/T offenders also need to be brought in. This 'outside' field needs to be developed too. In doing so, there needs to be a support system in place for the professionals involved, both for their safety and security as well as their health. For RAN P&P, this meeting provided insights into the experiences of several Member States on including family and social networks in the rehabilitation of VE/T offenders. Future meetings exploring this topic may focus more in-depth on the social network element. In addition, a meeting built around case-studies and first-hand stories of involving family and social network of VE/T offenders, would help practitioners dig deeper into the challenges and responses set out in this paper.