

Diversions in Australia: not your traditional counter-terrorism response

Perspective

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The Australian terrorism environment is seeing younger people come to the attention of authorities for a range of reasons including changes in their behaviour and beliefs that may be indicative of a susceptibility to radicalisation. Quite often these concerns do not meet the threshold for a criminal investigation but show a vulnerability that can be exploited by extremist and criminal groups. The AFP has seen young people who were on the periphery of a counter terrorism investigation quickly become the main targets.

This fluid environment requires the AFP and law enforcement in general, to be innovative in their response and incorporate non-traditional counter terrorism approaches, such as prevention and early intervention. As a result, in November 2014, the AFP broadened its counter terrorism responses, and created the Diversion Team to identify, evaluate and assist at-risk individuals, and prevent them from going down the path of committing politically motivated violence in Australia.

The Diversion Team forms part of the AFP-led National Disruption Group (NDG) within the Counter Terrorism portfolio and focuses on developing alternatives to prosecution, such as reintegration and rehabilitation, while balancing national security requirements. As part of the Attorney-General's Department Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Intervention Framework, diversion and intervention activities focus on working with vulnerable individuals, particularly young people, to prevent them from committing terrorist-related activity or travelling overseas to fight with a terrorist group.

The Diversion Team consists of a mix of intelligence staff, sworn members, administrative staff and behavioural scientists; however, its strength lies in its relationships with other agencies and the community. Representatives from ASIO, ABF, DIBP, ATO, DHS (Centrelink, Child Care and Medicare), ACC and AUSTRAC are co-located with the NDG and share information to allow for a comprehensive evaluation of people considered at-risk of radicalising to violent extremism.

ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
ABF	Australian Border Force
DIBP	Department of Immigration and Border Protection
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
DHS	Department of Human Services (Centrelink, Child Care and Medicare)
ACC	Australian Crime Commission
AUSTRAC	Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre

Assistance from schools, government-sponsored community organisations such as the Police Citizens Youth Club, non-government community groups, clerics, mentors and others who are invested in developing resilient communities assist in the development and implementation of individual programs. It is recognised within the team that diversion activity will not be effective



Above & right: Unity Cup: building trust and collaboration with the community.



without the trust and collaboration of communities, participating individuals, frontline staff at all levels of government and service providers.

One of the main responsibilities of the Diversion Team is to identify people suitable to participate in a state-led intervention program. Initial referrals to the Diversion Team can come from a range of entities including members of the community (such as teachers, social workers, health care professionals and concerned citizens through the National Security Hotline), Joint Counter Terrorism Teams, state and territory police services and other Commonwealth and/or state government agencies.

Upon receiving a referral the Diversion Team undertakes a comprehensive deconfliction process with all relevant Commonwealth government agencies to collate information and assess whether the person is of interest to another agency. This avoids duplication and ensures that diversion activities and engagement strategies do not adversely impact on current investigations.

Depending on the state/territory where the person lives, the Diversion Team then works with the local CVE Coordinator (who are either from a state/territory police service or other government agency) to assess the suitability of the person for intervention, as well as the

development of an individualised program. This is done through the completion of a comprehensive risk and needs analysis to assess the person's suitability and

recommend strategies for diversion. This may include targeted CVE strategies to address issues such as identity, social relations, and ideology, or more traditional services such as assistance with housing, schooling, employment, mental health and drug or alcohol dependence.

Diversion activities focus on working with vulnerable individuals to prevent them from being drawn into committing terrorist-related activity or travelling overseas to fight with a terrorist group. This can include addressing the factors that make extremist groups attractive, which often start with social relationships, as well as factors that make engagement with the mainstream difficult, which could include (but is not limited to) family dysfunction.

Not every person referred to the Diversion Team will be found suitable for early intervention engagement. This can happen if a person is closely associated with persons of interest of a current CT investigation and any



Building community trust: Click here to watch a video with AFP Commander Peter Whowell on the 2016 Unity Cup.

engagement from a diversion perspective could have an adverse impact on that investigation. Additionally, a person may be excluded if he or she is considered too far along the path of radicalisation for early intervention to be effective or presents an unacceptable risk to the safety of service providers.

In some cases, individuals may have ‘self-corrected’ since the initial referral was received and no longer require intervention and assistance with reintegration. Similarly, not everyone who is considered suitable will be willing to participate. Involvement in a state-led intervention program is entirely voluntary and people are not mandated to participate.

The Diversion Team relies upon its network of government and community partners to implement individualised, early intervention and violence disengagement strategies. Once the person has been assessed as suitable for diversion and shows a willingness to participate, it becomes the responsibility of the relevant state or territory CVE coordinator to:

- Meet with the person (and their parents if they are a minor) and seek their consent to participate in the program
- Identify and engage appropriate service providers
- Monitor the progress of participants on the program
- Provide de-identified reporting on implementation of the Intervention Framework.

- During this time the Diversion Team continues to assess the individual’s progress and effectiveness of the strategies.

The inclusion of psychologists and behavioural scientists within the Diversion Team enables it to provide expert advice on the behaviours and motivation of an individual to assessment panels, as well as assist with the design and assessment of appropriate intervention strategies. As part of on-going relationships with operational teams, the behavioural science capability can assist investigators with risk assessments, target selection, engagement and management strategies. The sharing of capabilities and resources develops a stronger relationship for a holistic approach to addressing the threat of terrorism.

While the Diversion Team assists the national security environment by countering violent extremism through early intervention and focusing on the needs of individuals who may be at risk of, or already on the path to, radicalisation, the community is pivotal to the AFP’s success. Our community partners play an essential role in the early detection, intervention and prevention of disengaged persons and our best defence is well-informed and well-equipped families, communities and institutions. Social cohesion and resilience build safe, secure and crime-resistant communities, which are an integral part of the Australian Government’s approach to countering the terrorist threat. After all, the best way to counter terrorism is to prevent radicalisation towards violence in the first place.