

Addressing violent extremism in Quebec

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Violent extremism in Canada is now considered a significant public health issue requiring prevention programs. At the same time that a surge in far-right movements has become a top concern for national security, Ottawa continues efforts to bring home and reintegrate women detained in Syria after traveling to join the Islamic State. A new study

calls for more specialized services to assess and treat radicalized individuals with mental health disorders who may be vulnerable and whose distress may be expressed through violent behavior.

The study was led by a team of Montreal researchers including McGill University Professor Cécile Rousseau, who is part of the Polarization Team in Quebec, a specialized clinical group addressing violent extremism attached to the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Ouest-de-l'Île-de-Montréal.

The study, which included more than 150 radicalized individuals referred to the Polarization Team, shows that a majority of extremist individuals needed [mental health services](#) but often failed to receive them because they were distrustful of the system or because [primary care providers](#) felt unequipped to deal with them.

The association between violent extremism and [mental health disorders](#) raises specific challenges for security agencies and clinical services, say the researchers. However, the researchers warn their findings should not be interpreted as evidence that those with mental health disorders are more likely to be attracted to [violent extremism](#).

"This assumption, which can stigmatize patients with [mental disorders](#), is not supported by the findings, which only show there's a sizable group of individuals with extremist views and mental health disorders that are in need of services and social reintegration programs," says Rousseau, who is also a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University.

Understanding the association

According to the team, the findings suggest that extremist ideas circulating in our society may be inspiring distress and behaviors in individuals with specific mental health disorders who may be vulnerable

to becoming radicalized. This is a challenge primary care providers will have to address, they say.

Looking at trends among the group, the researchers found roughly a third of radicalized individuals were involved with far-right extremism and another third with non-ideologically based violence. More than a quarter held extremist views on gender. Most of them had some previous contact with mental health services. More than two-thirds struggled with an anxiety disorder (36.9%) or a stress-related or mood disorder (35.7%), and nearly a third had an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis (28%).

The study authors say specialized services like as the Polarization Team are important to develop knowledge and practices that can be deployed in youth and adult mental health services more broadly—and to support and guide other primary care and mental health service providers working with radicalized individuals.

More information: Cécile Rousseau et al, Clinical Services Addressing Violent Extremism: The Quebec Model, *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14999013.2022.2147254](https://doi.org/10.1080/14999013.2022.2147254)

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