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The Nexus Between Crime and Violent Extremism in Kenya
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Gayatri Sahgal and Martine Zeuthen

The link between crime and violent extremism (VE) has been the subject of increasing scholarly and political concern. While there is evidence to suggest a link between crime and VE, such evidence is particularly limited in developing countries. In an attempt to address this gap in understanding, Gayatri Sahgal and Martine Zeuthen conducted a study in a prison environment to investigate the relationship between criminality and VE in Kenya. The study finds a tenuous link between other types of crime and VE at the individual and organisational levels, with some indication of specific institutional patterns of recruitment and radicalisation within prisons.

Since the 9/11 attacks, there has been growing scholarly and political concern about patterns of recruitment and radicalisation and pathways into violent extremism (VE). Interest in the field has spawned a vast body of research, with one key area of focus being the link between individuals' criminal histories and engagement in VE activities. Specifically, while VE constitutes a sub-group of criminal activity, there has been increasing engagement with understanding whether individuals with criminal records (for non-VE-related crimes) are more likely to turn to VE and if so, under what circumstances. While the debate on the crime–terror nexus is not new,[1] the evidence in support of the link, especially in developing countries such as Kenya, is relatively limited.[2]

In Kenya, there has been increasing interest in the pathways to recruitment and radicalisation to VE.[3] Much of this concern is related to the increase in the number of terrorist incidents since 2011, when Kenya launched its military operation in Somalia.[4] Consequently, a number of studies have attempted to identify the principal drivers of VE, ranging from the micro (individual) and meso (group-specific) to the macro (structural).[5] More recent research has also started to discuss how groups such as

1. Florence Keen and Anton Moiseienko, 'Much Ado About the Nexus: Why Does the Crime/Terror Nexus Matter?', *RUSI Newsbrief* (Vol. 38, No. 7, August 2018), pp. 1–4; Enrique Desmond Arias and Nazia Hussain, 'Organized Crime and Terrorism', in Gary LaFree and Joshua D Freilich (eds), *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism* (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), pp. 373–84.
2. Kenya is identified as a lower middle-income country by the World Bank. See World Bank, 'New Country Classifications by Income Level: 2018-2019', <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/new-country-classifications-income-level-2018-2019>, accessed 11 June 2020.
3. Anneli Botha, 'Assessing the Vulnerability of Kenyan Youths to Radicalisation and Extremism', *Institute for Security Studies Papers* (No. 245, April 2013), pp. 1–28.
4. International Crisis Group, 'The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia', Africa Report No. 184, 15 February 2012.
5. Peter Romaniuk et al., 'What Drives Violent Extremism in East Africa and How Should Development Actors Respond?', *African Security* (Vol. 11, No. 2, 2018), pp. 160–80.

Al-Shabaab use crime 'as a funding mechanism and a recruiting avenue' to further their cause.[6] Despite the policy preoccupation and interest, limited empirical research has been conducted to assess the specific contours of the relationship between crime and VE.[7]

In an attempt to address this gap in understanding, the authors conducted a study to investigate the overlap between individuals' criminal histories and the patterns of radicalisation and recruitment into VE organisations. The study specifically sought to interrogate three main dimensions of the relationship between crime and VE: individual (the overlap between individuals' criminal histories and VE offences); organisational (the level of coordination and link between criminal and VE organisations); and institutional (the pattern of radicalisation and recruitment within the institutional context of the prison). To investigate these dimensions, a qualitative study was conducted with the support of the Kenya Prison Service in two prison complexes: an adult high-security prison with sections for both male and female prisoners; and a juvenile prison. The sample of respondents included convicted VE offenders (VEOs), remandees (Rs) undergoing trial for VE-related offences, prison administrators and staff, lawyers for VEOs/Rs, paralegals, and a justice adviser.[8]

This article summarises the principal findings emerging from the study and makes recommendations for future research. In particular, the study finds limited support for the overlap between crime and VE at the individual or organisational levels, but some evidence of institutional–specific links.

Prevailing Perspectives on the Relationship Between Crime and Violent Extremism

The relationship between crime and VE has been an important area of focus in the field of criminology, with the literature identifying clear cases of overlap but also difference. Broadly speaking, 'crime' refers to an act that involves the breaking of existing laws. While VE is also 'a form of crime in all essential

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6. Katharine Petrich, 'Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine: Al-Shabaab's Criminal Activities in the Horn of Africa', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (17 October 2019), DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2019.1678873.

7. *Ibid.*

8. The sample size included 15 identified VEOs from the total population of 43 VEOs.

2

respects',[9] it constitutes a specific type of criminal activity. Most governments define VE as 'politically motivated violence that intentionally targets civilians and/or non-combatants'.[10] In terms of similarities, crime and VE are both seen to undermine social trust and cohesion, producing similarly damaging effects on wider society.[11] Additionally, individuals who commit non-terrorism-related criminal offences and those who perpetrate acts of VE have also been found to be similar in terms of basic demographic characteristics such as age, gender and economic background.[12]

While such similarities are important, there are also apparent differences between the two. Most criminals do not use ideology to justify their actions, unlike violent extremists whose motivation for violence is often the furtherance of a political or ideological cause.[13] Criminals also vary widely in how they perceive their illegal behaviour, and few see their crimes as being altruistic.[14] By contrast, VE actors frequently believe that their actions are in the interest of the greater good and are for the benefit of their particular in-group.[15] Criminals 'also usually try to avoid detection', while 'those who commit acts of political violence are often seeking the largest audience possible'.[16]

Several rationales and theories have been put forward about the extent of overlap and difference. The literature traces three distinct approaches: individual or agency-oriented, which highlights the individual motivations that may guide those with a criminal history to join VE groups; organisational, which focuses on the networks of collaboration and overlap between criminal networks and VE organisations; and institutional, which emphasises the influence of institutions, such as prisons, in creating conditions for recruitment of criminals to VE groups.

Individual or Agency-Oriented Motivation

One of the most longstanding arguments to explain the nexus between crime and VE is that those who commit crimes and those who perpetrate acts of VE (which the authors acknowledge are also crimes) are influenced by similar factors. In their study on political extremist offenders in the US, Gary LaFree and colleagues found that many of the factors such as limited employment opportunities, radical peer networks, history of mental illness and military experience correlated with VE, similar to trends observed among ordinary criminals.[17]

Meanwhile, Rajan Basra, Peter R Neumann and Claudia Brunner argue that while VE groups are different, in that many purport to offer redemption, they are also similar in terms of the types of violent behavioural patterns they encourage.[18] In their study of 79 European jihadists with criminal backgrounds, they found evidence of the 'redemption narrative' whereby recruitment into a VE group followed some type of traumatic experience that prompted those in their study to reassess their entire life and provided the impetus for a radical change in values and behaviour.[19]

In addition, Basra, Neumann and Brunner argue that VE groups also offer opportunities for skills transfer as criminality involves similar skills to those of VE.[20] Such skills include a lower threshold for violence and an ability to deal with law enforcement agencies, manage stressful situations, employ weapons and plan discrete logistics. In the East

9.   Ronald V Clarke and Graeme R Newman, *Outsmarting the Terrorists* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), p. 1.

10. Peter R Neumann, 'Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation in 15 Countries', International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2010.

11. David S Kirk and Mauri Matsuda, 'Legal Cynicism, Collective Efficacy, and the Ecology of Arrest', *Criminology* (Vol. 49, No. 2, 2011), pp. 443–72.

12. Gary LaFree et al., 'Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States', *Criminology* (Vol. 56, No. 2, 2018), pp. 233–68.

13. Louise I Shelley and John T Picarelli, 'Methods Not Motives: Implications of the Convergence of International Organized Crime and Terrorism', *Police Practice and Research* (Vol. 3, No. 4, 2002), pp. 305–18.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree and Arie Kruglanski, 'Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization', *Political Psychology* (Vol. 38, No. 5, October 2017), pp. 815–31.

16. LaFree et al., 'Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States', p. 234.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Rajan Basra, Peter R Neumann and Claudia Brunner, 'Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus', ICSR, 2016.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

African context, groups such as Al-Shabaab have also been known to recruit former criminals for their specific skills[21] – 'experience with violence', 'an existing network of black and grey markets', and the capacity to leverage and exploit criminal activities.[22]

While persuasive, these perspectives have been contested by others such as Amy M Doughten[23] and David C Pyrooz and colleagues,[24] who argue that the lack of empirical and generalisable data means that firm parallels should not be drawn. While there may be some similarities in terms of recruitment styles and member characteristics, criminal groups and VE organisations have fundamental differences in terms of key socioeconomic differences (such as age, years of military service, race and religion) and the nature and structure of their organisations.[25]

Jonathan Challgren and colleagues,[26] who advocate applying public health models, suggest that similar structural and social factors such as economic deprivation and social marginalisation which are related to criminal activity can also motivate VE. However, despite such commonalities, the pathways into VE and criminality are often varied. Thus, in responding to the challenges presented by the two groups, different strategies need to be designed.[27]

Organisational Motivation

Despite the noted absence of robust evidence on the overlap between crime and VE, advocates of the organisational perspective highlight several examples of VE organisations using and/or condoning organised criminal activity in pursuit of their interests. According to Skye Riddell Roberts, some VE groups have been known to engage in criminal activity – including, for example, extortion, kidnapping, rent extraction and illegal taxation – to fund their activities.[28] In the context of East Africa, Al-Shabaab has been accused of being involved with syndicates controlling the smuggling of sugar, livestock and charcoal.[29] Several reports have also concluded that Al-Shabaab regularly engages in the extortion of local businesses and international organisations,[30] primarily within Somalia but also in borderland regions of Kenya.

Another dimension, as highlighted by Enrique Desmond Arias and Nazia Hussain, is that the nexus evolves over time in 'complex cycles through which criminal groups can become terrorist organisations, and through which terrorist groups can become criminal'.[31] Similarly, according to Tamara Makarenko, groups can move up and down the continuum between organised crime and terrorism, depending on the operational environment.[32] At the centre of the continuum lies a point of convergence in which a single group may display characteristics of both criminality and VE. For example, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was a type of hybrid organisation that engaged in both the drug trade and political violence. Nevertheless, while Makarenko mainly discusses how a single group can slide along the crime–terror continuum, Louise

21. In the 2019 report by the UN Monitoring Group for Somalia and Eritrea (SEMG), it was noted that a known criminal with Kenyan nationality and non-Somali ethnicity was recruited and trained in the Gedo region of Somalia. See UN Security Council, 'Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2060', S/2019/858, November 2019.

22. Petrich, 'Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine', p. 11.

23. Amy M Doughten, 'Differences and Similarities Between Gangs, Cults and Terrorist Groups', Queens University of Charlotte, 2012.

24. David C Pyrooz et al., 'Cut from the Same Cloth? A Comparative Study of Domestic Extremists and Gang Members in the United States', *Justice Quarterly* (Vol. 35, No. 1, 2018), pp. 1–32.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Jonathan Challgren et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism: Applying the Public Health Model', Georgetown Security Studies Review, Georgetown University, October 2016.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Skye Riddell Roberts, 'The Crime-Terror Nexus: Ideology's Misleading Role in Islamist Terrorist Groups', E-International Relations, 24 April 2016.

29. Warrior Insight, 'Kenya Weekly Insight Report 01-07 June', 2017; Ido Levy and Abdi Yusuf, 'How Do Terrorist Organizations Make Money? Terrorist Funding and Innovation in the Case of Al-Shabaab', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, (17 June 2019), DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2019.1628622.

30. Grace Chesson et al., 'Somalia's Organized Crime Networks: A New Framework to Degrade Al-Shabaab', *International Affairs Review* (Vol. 25, No. 1, 2017), pp. 1–17.

31. Arias and Hussain, 'Organized Crime and Terrorism'.

32. Tamara Makarenko, 'The Crime–Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay Between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism', *Global Crime* (Vol. 6, No. 1, February 2004), pp. 129–45.

I Shelley and John T Picarelli put forward a thesis of 'methods and motives' to explain collaborations between criminal and terrorist groups. For them, once groups converge around shared goals and adopt each other's working methods, a 'symbiotic relationship' may emerge.[33]

Sam Mullins points out that within these 'symbiotic arrangements', VE groups and criminals can interact with one another based on business-like arrangements.[34] Terrorist groups such as Al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State, for instance, maintain pragmatic alliances with criminals for various logistical reasons regardless of ideological differences.[35] Al-Qa'ida is known to have cooperated with the Italian Camorra criminal organisation for its expertise in forging travel documents. The Camorra, in turn, has helped smuggle Al-Qa'ida operatives to safe houses in Europe.[36] Regarding Kenya, Katharine Petrich argues that Al-Shabaab is also particularly adept in creating symbiotic relations and securing support from criminal groups who do not share its ideology.[37]

Institutional Motivation

Another stream of scholars argues that the institutional context of a prison environment provides fertile ground for the recruitment of prisoners. In a departure from individual and organisational approaches, prisons are considered to offer a large pool of potential recruits who are amenable to being indoctrinated by persuasive and charismatic extremists inside the prison.[38]

Based on a study conducted within the US prison system, Mark S Hamm found that 'inmates often adopted anti-authoritarian attitudes and were easily pressed into a gang, where they met an inmate leader who promised hope'.[39] For Hamm, prison gangs were distinct in that that they had their 'own hierarchy, code of conduct and secret communication system', as well as 'their own collective identity'.[40] Similarly, Roberts argues that inmates do not convert to Islam because of ideology, but rather as a result of the gang dynamic and the presence of strong social bonds within the prison context.[41]

Nathan Thompson finds that an interplay of institutional, social and individual factors creates a fertile ground for radicalisation.[42] Drawing on Jack Mezirow's 'transformative learning' theory,[43] Elizabeth Mulcahy and colleagues argue that the psychological strain of recent incarceration can often act as a transformative trigger – the acute and chronic stress of being in a prison context can engender feelings of self-doubt.[44] In such situations, individuals may be especially vulnerable to encouragement by their peer network.[45]

Other scholars point out that it is not only the environmental or peer-related factors, but the treatment meted out to prisoners that can also be influential. Farhad Khosrokhavar notes two types of frustration that can engender radicalisation: frustration endured by prisoners, independent of

33. Louise I Shelley and John T Picarelli, 'Methods and Motives: Exploring Links Between Transnational Organized Crime and International Terrorism', *Trends in Organized Crime* (Vol. 9, No. 2, 2005), pp. 52–67.

34. Sam Mullins, 'Parallels Between Crime and Terrorism: A Social Psychological Perspective', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 32, No. 9, 2009), pp. 811–30.

35. Roberts, 'The Crime-Terror Nexus'.

36. Christina Schori Liang, 'Shadow Networks: The Growing Nexus of Terrorism and Organised Crime', GCSP Policy Paper No. 20, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, September 2011.

37. Petrich, 'Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine'.

38. Liang, 'Shadow Networks'.

39. Mark S Hamm, 'Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions', *National Institute of Justice Journal* (No. 261, 2008), pp. 14–19.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

41. Roberts, 'The Crime-Terror Nexus'.

42. Nathan Thompson, 'Root Cause Approach to Prisoner Radicalisation', *Salus Journal* (Vol. 4, No. 3, 2016), pp. 18–33.

43. This is a framework for understanding how individuals learn and adapt to new environments. In brief, the theory argues that when an individual experiences a crisis (known as the transformative trigger), the individual uses pre-existing habits to make sense of the event. When habitual ways are no longer helpful in managing and adapting to the situation, this results in 'distortion'. In such cases, the individual responds by exploring new experiences and undergoing critical reflection. See Elizabeth Mulcahy, Shannon Merrington and Peter Bell, 'The Radicalisation of Prison Inmates: Exploring Recruitment, Religion and Prisoner Vulnerability', *Journal of Human Security* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2013), pp. 4–14.

44. Mulcahy, Merrington and Bell, 'The Radicalisation of Prison Inmates'.

45. *Ibid.*

their faith or creed, from overcrowding, understaffing and inadequate facilities; and frustration directly related to faith or ethnicity, which is much more likely to result in radicalisation because it affects core or sacred feelings.[46] Drawing on the example from France, Khosrokhavar argues that the banning of expressions of Islamic identity by the authorities created a fertile ground for radical Islamists and provoked a more radical interpretation of Islam within the prison populous.[47]

The debate on separating the convicted VE prisoners from the rest of the inmates is also worth considering. Despite their political and ideological motivations, which potentially differentiate them from the rest of the prison population, according to Neumann, 'there are no hard and fast rules about whether terrorist prisoners should be concentrated or separated and isolated'.[48] For Neumann, the risk of radicalisation is dependent on how the policy is implemented, the availability of the necessary resources, and the nature and dynamics of the particular group in question.[49] For example, in the case of groups which are dispersed and leaderless, bringing together followers in prison could help create structures that had not existed before and should be avoided where possible. Similarly, Clarke R Jones argues that despite its extensive use, the isolation model often ends up hardening convicted terrorists and enhances their desire to use any means available to exact revenge.[50]

Radicalisation in the prison environment should, therefore, be seen as influenced by several factors: the prison regime; inmate culture; the inmate moral code; racism; social barriers; and basic survival needs.[51] Since different countries have their own unique social and religious characteristics, as well as different prison and criminal justice systems, the radicalisation and recruitment of mainstream inmates towards VE is not a foregone conclusion and should ideally be interrogated within the boundaries of its particular context.[52]

Summary

A review of the literature, therefore, does not provide a consistent picture of a nexus between crime and VE. While some authors argue the relevance of the redemptive, psychosocial, skills-transfer argument, the generalisability of these findings is questioned by other studies. Apart from sharing similarities in socioeconomic backgrounds, scholars such as Doughten, and Pyrooz and colleagues point out that there appear to be limited overlaps in membership. At the organisational level, some overlaps may exist with known instances of VE groups engaging or making use of criminal activities and collaborating with criminal groups. However, the nature of collaboration is found to be contextual and pragmatic. Similarly, the role played by the prison environment, its organisation and the treatment of prisoners has been evidenced in some contexts. Nevertheless, institutional-based patterns of recruitment have not been consistently noted, encouraging those such as Jones to contend that radicalisation in prisons should not be seen as a foregone conclusion, but rather as an interplay of several factors which may emerge only under specific circumstances.[53]

Methodology for Data Collection

To address the gaps in understanding of the crime–VE nexus in Kenya, the authors conducted a qualitative study in two of the approved prison complexes that had a sizeable number of VEOs/Rs.[54] The main research questions were:

- Do VE actors have a criminal history?
- Do VE organisations have relations with other criminal networks?
- Do prisons serve as a recruiting ground for VE?

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46. Farhad Khosrokhavar, 'Radicalization in Prison: The French Case', *Politics, Religion and Ideology* (Vol. 14, No. 2, 2013), pp. 284–306.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Neumann, 'Prisons and Terrorism', p. 21.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Clarke R Jones, 'Are Prisons Really Schools for Terrorism? Challenging the Rhetoric on Prison Radicalization', *Punishment and Society* (Vol. 16, No. 1, January 2014), pp. 74–103.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Andrew Silke and Tinka Veldhuis, 'Countering Violent Extremism in Prisons: A Review of Key Recent Literature and Critical Research Gaps', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. 11, No. 5, 2017), pp. 2–11.

53. Jones, 'Are Prisons Really Schools for Terrorism?'.

54. At the time of the study, there were approximately five prison facilities which could accommodate VEO/R prisoners. However, researchers were only given permission to conduct research in two prison complexes.

The prison environment was chosen as the context for the research for three main reasons:

1. It provided an opportunity to study the extent of the overlap between criminal offences relating to violent crime and possible reoffences associated with VE activity.
2. It represented a controlled environment where individual criminal histories could be examined to provide insights on organisational-level links.
3. It allowed a study of the potential contribution of the institutional set-up and inmate culture towards fostering recruitment and radicalisation.

A qualitative approach to data collection was considered to be most suitable, given the small and unstable nature of the prison population. Further, as Hamm and Ramón Spaaij argue, this method is particularly suited to VE research because 'it not only has the capacity to analyze in depth a small number of cases, but also the ability to discover the sequence of individual trajectories leading to terrorism'.[55] Additionally, the sensitivity of the topic meant that the authors had to take into consideration the concerns of the Kenyan security establishment – in particular a reticence towards large-scale quantitative studies that would risk exposure and would also be challenging to implement and manage.

In designing the methodology and the tools, however, the authors took due consideration to ensure that the data collected could be verified and triangulated.[56] This was done with the understanding that VEOs/Rs may provide false or misleading information for several reasons, including 'to discredit others, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, to aggrandize their own role in events, through unwitting self-deception, or simply because their memories are flawed'.[57]

To allow for the triangulation of information, the sampling approach was based on interviewing VEOs/Rs, prison officers, prison administrators, lawyers, justice system experts and paralegals.

The sampling design was made purposive for two reasons: 1) owing to the limited availability of data, the prisoners' details and backgrounds were considered to be classified information and were not provided in advance to the authors; and 2) participation in the study was voluntary – most prisoners, especially Rs, were uncomfortable with being interviewed. Rs, in particular, who were in the midst of judicial proceedings, were the most resistant to being interviewed because they feared that any information they divulged could be used against them during their trial.

The intentions of the research were clearly communicated to prison staff and VEO/R participants, as has been suggested as good practice in the prison research literature.[58] This included a management plan for conducting interviews with inmates, which were conducted within a safe prison facility but in the presence of prison wardens. The authors were not allowed inside the main prison area, and the prison authorities were reluctant to allow interviews without the presence of prison staff. However, prison wardens kept their distance and attempts were made to ensure that the confidentiality of the study participants was maintained. The interviews were organised so that the VEO/R participants were able to decide how to position themselves to avoid being heard or recognised. The interviews were also conducted in the language preferred by the VEO/R participants, and there was an interpreter present at all times. All participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, and their anonymity would be protected. Participants were also able to withdraw their participation at any point in the interview process, without justification. Participants were not compensated for their time, but the cultural norm of providing a small 'host gift' in the form of soap bars, biscuits and soda was observed.[59] No individual gift exceeded $2.

Overall, the study included approximately 15 individuals from the total population of 43 VEO/R prisoners who were either incarcerated or in remand across all three prisons (at the time of the study). The types of offences included violations under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2012 (POTA), including: possession of articles connected

55. Mark S Hamm and Ramón Spaaij, 'Paradigmatic Case Studies and Prison Ethnography: Future Directions in Terrorism Research', in LaFree and Freilich (eds), *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism*, p. 207.
56. James Khalil, 'A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 42, No. 4, 2019), pp. 429–43.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Hamm and Spaaij, 'Paradigmatic Case Studies and Prison Ethnography'.
59. Petrich, 'Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine'.

with offences under the POTA; possession of unauthorised explosives; membership of a terrorist organisation; and promotion or facilitation of a terrorist attack. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sample study, which included a total of 24 respondents.

Table 1: Sample of Study Respondents

Type	Sample	Male	Female
VE offender (convicted)	9	8	1
VE remandee	6	5	1
Prison officer	5	5	0
Paralegal	2	2	0
Lawyer	1	1	0
Justice adviser	1	0	1
Total	**24**	**21**	**3**

Methodological Limitations

In considering the methodological approach, there are two fundamental limitations which need to be borne in mind when interpreting the significance of the findings.

The first is the limited sampling frame. The study was conducted in two prisons, but only 15 VEOs/Rs agreed to participate. This limited sample size implies that the findings from the study were not readily generalisable. The approach was primarily qualitative, and therefore the emphasis was on understanding the process of radicalisation and recruitment within the context of two high-security prisons. The study was less tailored towards ensuring the external reliability of the findings.

The second important limitation is that despite attempts, researchers were unable to interview respondents over multiple sessions and establish relationships of trust, which are needed for 'fact checking' and verifying responses. Consequently, the information provided based on one round of interviews was not sufficient in establishing a consistent understanding of the prisoners and their backgrounds. Moreover, the lack of available information of the prisoners' criminal and VE histories also proved to be a further hindrance in constructing a consistent narrative. To address this problem, researchers invested time in interviewing

prison staff, paralegals and lawyers of the prisoners who had in-depth knowledge and experience of the sample respondents. The process of triangulation helped to reveal some insights on the dynamics and patterns of radicalisation and was also helpful in verifying the respondent's narratives.

Methodology for Analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative techniques. All interview notes were transcribed and then digitised. The digitised notes were then coded and analysed in Microsoft Excel. The three main research questions guided the code development process, and therefore responses falling under specific themes were grouped. After that, drawing on the current literature, sub-codes (or sub-themes) were developed. Responses corresponding or reflecting sub-themes were then duly clubbed and marked. Responses that could not be classified or diverged from the literature were classified separately, and additional categories were developed for such responses. However, given the limited sampling frame, the focus of the analytical process was to uncover themes rather than to quantify the number of responses that resonated with a particular theme. This approach has also been followed in the rest of the article, such that in place of quantifying the responses, a summary of the points of agreement and divergence has been presented. This was done in response to the principal limitation of the study, namely the limited sample size.

Further, at the behest of the Kenya Prison Service administration and the need for protecting the identity of the VEOs/Rs and prison staff, specific details of the respondents have been avoided and, in some cases, identifying details have also been altered.

Findings

In line with the recommendations made by Robert Agnew,[60] a life story approach was adopted for the study, and participants were asked to reflect on their history prior to incarceration and their lived experiences within the prison.

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60. Robert Agnew, 'Storylines as a Neglected Cause of Crime', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (Vol. 43, No. 2, May 2006), pp. 119–47.

Socio-Demographic Profile

Consistent with the profile of VEOs/Rs within the African context,[61] the majority of the VEO/R participants were below the age of 35 (11/15). Not accounting for the proportion of juvenile VE prisoners (4/15), the majority of whom were below the age of 18, a significant proportion (6/11) of the adults were between 18 and 34 years of age. The high proportion of male compared with female VEOs/Rs within the wider African context[62] was also reflected in the sample of respondents. Two of the VEOs/Rs were female, out of the three female VEO/R prisoners. Similarly, there was also a higher proportion of Muslims compared with Christians; only one respondent described Christianity as their primary religion.

In terms of educational status, the respondents included in the study were similar to the general profile of VEOs/Rs noted by other studies.[63] A significant proportion of respondents (10/15) had not completed their secondary schooling. The low levels of education were also, to some extent, reflected in their employment status. When asked what they were doing prior to being arrested, seven (7/15) participants stated that they were unemployed, including the proportion of juvenile VEOs/Rs, who were neither in school nor employed. Among those who were employed, a substantial proportion were engaged in part-time work (4/11), with only two reporting that they had held formal sector jobs prior to their incarceration.

Life in the Prison and Access to Services

The life and experience in prison varied considerably between the two prison complexes. Most respondents within the adult male prison said they were kept separate from the rest of the general prison population. According to the prison officers, in the adult male prison, two blocks were reserved for different categories of offenders – one for higher-risk prisoners and another for lower-risk offenders. VEOs/Rs were assigned their blocks on arrival after being screened by the authorities.

Within their blocks, the VEO/R participants in the adult male prison stated that since they were not allowed to partake in the vocational skill-building activities (reserved for non-VEO/R prisoners in Kenya), they spent most of their time either reading the Qur'an or other religious texts. While most participants were familiar with Islamic teachings and texts, others relayed how they were introduced to such texts in prison. One participant said he learned about Islam in prison and had since converted to the religion. Apart from such activities, participants reported that they spent the rest of their time talking, exercising or playing games. The officers also described how the VEOs/Rs spent considerable time discussing their cases and speaking to their lawyers.

Similar to the adult male participants, the female participants from the women's section of the adult prison also described being separated from other female prisoners and kept in separate cells with the 'capital cases' (more serious crimes with longer sentences). Unlike in the male prison, they had access to television, but it was placed in the common room and they could only watch from their cells if they had a direct line of sight to it. However, like the adult male participants, the female participants did not have access to other vocational skills.

In the juvenile prison, in comparison, the VEO/R participants were not isolated from the rest of the inmates. They were allowed to integrate and were given access to the same types of facilities as non-VEO/R prisoners – including access to education and other vocational services. According to the superintendent in charge of the prison, this was because the juvenile VEOs/Rs represented a lower-risk category than the adult prisoners and because rehabilitation and reintegration were core focuses for the juvenile prison.

While most adult prisoners did not talk of ill treatment by the prison staff, the experience of being in a prison environment and not being able to see their relatives reportedly compounded feelings of depression and sadness. Other aspects that were noted to be of concern included the limited freedom and lack of facilities, especially in sanitation and hygiene.[64]

Criminal Histories of Violent Extremists

In narrating the circumstances that led to their arrest, all the VEOs/Rs interviewed stated that they had been falsely accused of their VE-related

61. UN Development Programme, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', 2017.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

64. Respondent 12.

crimes, either because they found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time or were then framed by other actors. None of the respondents admitted to the crimes and further denied that they had previously engaged in any VE activity. As one prisoner on remand in the adult prison recalled:

> I was visiting my brother, and when I got off the stage and asked for a ride from the Matatu [shared taxi] driver, I was taken instead to the Chief's [local leader's] house. I am not sure why the Matatu driver took me to the Chief's house, but once I reached [it], the Chief called the ATPU [Anti-Terror Police Unit] officer, and they then arrested me and accused me of supporting AS [Al-Shabaab]. I still do not know why I was arrested.[65]

In telling their stories and the circumstances that led up to their arrest, the participants' narrative styles were similar in that they were disjointed, chronologically inconsistent and employed imagery that underscored their helplessness and victimisation. However, the narratives also communicated the significance of the events as they understood them. The actual day of the arrest was usually highlighted first and was then followed by an extended narration of the experience of being questioned and arrested by the authorities. The circumstances preceding the arrest and the perspectives of the security agencies were usually ignored, creating an overall impression that highlighted the injustice of the events that followed and led to their incarceration. In the above narrative, for instance, the respondent did not initially communicate why they were considered to be suspicious and were taken to the Chief's house. Most of the respondents also seemed eager to speak about their life circumstances and the poverty and dispossession that they had experienced.

However, not all respondents were as inconsistent in their narration. The juvenile VEOs/Rs were more forthcoming in describing the events that led up to their arrest. However, they too did not acknowledge their offence and similarly insisted on their innocence, as captured in the following testimony.

> I was praying at the local mosque, Masjid Musa,[66] when the police raid began. One of the police officers recognised me and told me that my father had filed a report saying that I had gone to Somalia, as I had

run away from home earlier that week. After this, the police arrested me and a few of my friends whom they also suspected. We were then taken to a nearby police station. I was taken to a cell where I was handcuffed. Thereafter officers from another station arrived and took me to a different police station. One by one, we were all interviewed. I was interviewed last and was asked to look at a black book that contained the details of the most wanted terror suspects. I recognised one of my friends in the book – it was a picture of him on Eid with a group of friends. The interviewer then asked me when I had been to Somalia and who had taken me there. When I denied that I had been there, I was taken back to my cell and asked another set of questions about some other man whose name I didn't recognise. After that, I was brought before a judge who told me that formal charges had been brought against me.[67]

The Overlap Between Criminality and VE: Individual

In keeping with the assertion of their innocence, the VEOs/Rs interviewed also denied that they had interacted with the police and security forces before being arrested. Of the 15 interviewed, five reported that they had some interaction with the police, and the circumstances surrounding this interaction included petty offences such as payment of bribes or drug abuse. Only one respondent stated that their previous interaction had been of a more serious nature, and they had been arrested for physically abusing someone. Another respondent, denying that he had committed any crime, reported that he had been involved in a 'gang'. While this same respondent did not reveal that his gang was involved in any specific criminal activity, he alluded to the fact that the 'Maskani' (an informal gathering place) which they would frequent was also a haven for criminal gangs and was frequently raided by the police.[68]

Additionally, the juvenile participant who had been arrested at the Masjid Musa described how he had a cousin who, prior to joining Al-Shabaab, had been involved in a criminal gang and how he too had been exposed to VE content (while still denying any personal criminal links).

> Respondent: My cousin used to steal – but only petty crime. One day when he was in Lamu, the police arrested him. They accused him of going to Somalia even though he had no such plans. He was later released, but the police threatened him. After

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65. Respondent 16.
66. Masjid Musa is a mosque in Mombasa infamous for being a centre for radicalisation and recruitment. See *BBC News*, 'Kenya Terror Charges after Mombasa Police Raid Mosque', 3 February 2014.
67. Respondent 30.
68. Respondent 13.

this, my cousin felt he had no 'choice' but to escape to Somalia. He started making preparations to go. He joined Masjid Musa and changed his friends. His friends like him were also motivated to go to Somalia.

Author: What did he want to do in Somalia?

Respondent: In Somalia, he wanted to take revenge. He talked about killing the KDF [Kenya Defence Forces] and showed me pictures of Shabaab [Al-Shabaab] fighters killing KDF soldiers.[69]

Apart from these two narratives, no other respondents provided more detailed accounts of the individual link between crime and VE. In the absence of a national database of criminal records and convictions,[70] the prison officers in the adult prison mostly only knew of the offences committed by the VEOs/Rs according to their warrants and had limited knowledge of prior records. Anecdotal evidence of whether the VEO/R participants had been previously sent to the same prison for other crimes was also limited, and the officers did not have any means of identifying any of the VEO/R participants as repeat offenders.[71] In the juvenile prison, however, prison officers pointed out that some of the juvenile VEOs/Rs had been involved in 'petty crime'. However, most could offer few details on whether the criminality preceded involvement in VE activities.

> ## Prison officers stated that in their experience they had not witnessed clear organisational-level links between criminality and violent extremism

Similarly, the paralegals also did not know if there was a link between crime and VE for the participants. The paralegals, who knew of the criminal histories of most of the other prisoners, had limited knowledge of the VEOs/Rs due to their restricted interaction. The VEOs/Rs, according to them, seemed to have their own lawyers and often did not need paralegal support. Moreover, most of the paralegals were not trained in the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012),[72] so they were unable to provide the VEOs/Rs with much legal support.

The Overlap Between Criminality and VE: Organisational

There were limited instances of overlap between criminality and VE found at an organisational level. None of the respondents (13 VEOs/Rs) who were interviewed reported that there was an organisational link between crime and VE. While some did not provide an explanation as to why they felt the relationship was not strong, even when probed, others reported that because they were first-time offenders, they had no knowledge of VE organisations or their recruitment patterns. However, one adult remandee explained that there was no overlap in membership between the two groups because VE organisations paid less than criminal groups. When probed further, and asked how he knew that joining a criminal group was more lucrative, he reported:

> There are some people here who are trying to brainwash me and have asked me to join a gang and to do other things. These people are criminals, and they tell me that once I am released from jail, I should get involved with them rather than engage in 'jihad'.[73]

The views of the VEO/R participants were also echoed by the prison officers, who stated that in their experience they had not witnessed clear organisational-level links between criminality and VE. The extent to which there could be a link was attributed to the similarity of backgrounds. They claimed that criminals and VEOs/Rs came mostly from Majengo and Kisauni (socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in Mombasa). One senior officer conceded that while he did not think that criminals, many of whom were drug addicts, made 'good' VEOs/Rs, there could nevertheless be some measure of cooperation between gangs and extremist networks.

> The best-targeted people for extremist groups are those who are unemployed, and those who reside in slum areas. Those living in the slums join such groups

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69. Respondent 30.
70. A centralised database for two prisons (including one of the prison complexes included within the study) is currently being developed in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and will be rolled out nationally at a later date.
71. Respondent 23.
72. 'Prevention of Terrorism Act 2012', <https://issafrica.org/ctafrica/uploads/PREVENTION%20OF%20TERRORISM%20ACT.pdf>, accessed 23 June 2020.
73. Respondent 23.

to send a few coins to their parents. As for the rich and learned, they are usually lured by ideology – they are told that their brothers and sisters are suffering and that with their knowledge they should come train and help them. Extremist groups usually give the example of Somali and Arab countries and also say that they are oppressed due to the influence of the West.

Some extremist members then have also engaged in petty crimes such as taking drugs like *bhang* [marijuana], alcohol and heroin. However, long-term drug addicts cannot be recruited to that line [VE] as they need a stable person like a moderate drug user. Most of the gangs are defensive of their territories, and sometimes the extremists and criminals are intertwined whereby one of the two groups support each other so that they can continue to reside in the same area.[74]

Risk of Radicalisation Within the Prison Environment: Institutional

While most VEO/R participants denied prior relationships with any of the other prisoners, there appeared to be strong groups among them. These groups were strongest in the adult prisons and relatively less prominent in the juvenile prison. Within the juvenile prison, all the VEO/R participants (4/4) said that there were no groups within the prison. This view was also confirmed by the superintendent in charge, who asserted that groups were strategically discouraged to ensure that authority of the prison officers was not undermined.

The adult male VEO/R participants appeared to have close associations

In contrast to the juvenile prison, the adult female VEO/R participants spoke of some groups. These groups were mostly based around religion such that prisoners would usually associate with others from the same religious background. However, given the low number of VEOs/Rs within the female prison, it did not appear that there were specific groups among them.

The adult male VEO/R participants, in contrast, appeared to have close associations. While some of the male prisoners spoke of specific groups, either on the basis of language – one VEO/R did not speak Swahili and could not interact with those who could – or from previous associations and interactions, most admitted that there were usually good relations among the prisoners.

The prison officers mostly agreed with the statements made by the participants but argued that the VEOs/Rs in both the high- and low-security blocks were a close-knit community. These groups spent most of their time interacting and associating with one another. As a consequence of their isolation from the general prison population, they appeared to gravitate to one another and acted in concert. One officer responsible for screening prisoners explained in detail how the prisoners tended to transform once they had spent some time in prison:

> On admission, they are different. Once inside, they are coached by the others [VEOs/Rs]. They are told to hold information and to maintain their distance. They are also always cross-questioned by the group whenever they interact with one of the officers.[75]

According to the prison officers, each new entrant was brought within the fold of the larger group. In the words of one senior officer:

> The prisoners come to form a close network. They share the same food, eat from the same plate and spend all their time either reading or talking to one another.[76]

Strict controls were also reportedly exercised by the group and the leaders. According to the officers, there were likely two leaders of the group, one they referred to as the 'front-facing leader' who interacted with the officers, while the other was an 'internal leader' who controlled the group and ensured that members adhered to the group's rules. The ward officers, in particular, had an inkling of who the internal leaders were but maintained that it was very difficult to tell because the VEOs/Rs kept their distance.

> The prisoners maintain a distance from us. When they do not want us to understand something, they speak Arabic, not Swahili. They mostly also use Arabic when they want to discuss global events, or they want to say certain hateful things or abuse other religions.[77]

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74.   Respondent 24.
75.   Respondent 25.
76.   Respondent 24. Sharing food from the same plate is an Islamic tradition and is only atypical in that the prisoners' food is usually served on different plates.
77.   Respondent 28.

The relevance of Islam and religious discussions were also pointed out by officers. One noted that not only did the VEOs/Rs often discuss religion and religious teachings, but that there also appeared to be a trend of religious conversions with the Christian VEOs/Rs converting to Islam over a period of time.[78]

Discussion of Findings

The study found very limited evidence of overlaps between criminality and VE at the individual and organisational level. Similar to the findings of Doughten[79] and Pyrooz and colleagues,[80] the study found that there did not appear to be a clear connection between being a criminal and VE group membership.

Somewhat different to the findings of Petrich,[81] and Basra, Neumann and Brunner,[82] the VEO/R participants in the study did not allude to the 'redemption narrative' nor the 'skills transfer' argument.

> ### The nexus between other criminal activity and VE in the context of the two prison complexes in Kenya appears to be limited

Based on the testimonies of the VEO/R participants and the prison officers, none of the VEOs/Rs had a criminal past, although confirmatory data from criminal records was absent. Respondents, in fact, denied that criminals were routinely recruited into joining VE groups. Further, VEOs/Rs adopted a narrative style that was laden with motifs that underscored their innocence and helplessness. Thus, they appeared to make no distinction between their (potential) criminal and VE pasts, and most denied the existence of both. One part of the explanation may be that, unlike Petrich and others, this study focuses on the views of VEOs/Rs and not

petty criminals. However, the limited availability of confirmatory evidence of the criminal pasts of VEOs/Rs suggests that more consistent profiling of individual pathways from criminality to VE is needed to establish clear links.

At the organisational level, few instances of overlap were identified between criminal groups and VE organisations. The only potential overlap was reported to be in the case where criminal gangs and VE groups recruited from the same areas and within the same demographic group. Certain areas in Mombasa County were identified by prison officers as high risk for both criminal and VE activity. This was similar to Challgren and colleagues' argument on the commonality of risk factors between VE and other social ills, including crime.[83] Additionally, the argument (proposed principally by prison staff) that there were also instances of cooperation between VE groups and criminal gangs which occupied a similar space resonated somewhat with Mullins's theory.[84] However, from the interviews conducted for the study, it did not appear that the level of cooperation and coordination between the two groups was 'business-like', as described by Mullins. The testimony provided by one VEO/R participant in fact indicated that the pattern of membership may also flow in the opposite direction – with former VEOs/Rs recruited to criminal gangs. This may imply that despite limited reported overlaps, there may be some fluidity in membership between the two groups, especially in contexts where spaces for collaboration were known to be stronger. Further investigation, including instances of membership flowing from VE to crime, will be needed to corroborate the generalisability of this finding to other contexts.

Institutionally, strong group relations were observed in one of the prisons. The participants' narratives resonated with Hamm's findings relating to radicalisation following the prison gang model.[85] But while clear-cut cases of radicalisation could not be determined, the testimonies of the prison officers seemed to indicate a group dynamic

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78.   Respondent 29.
79.   Doughten, 'Differences and Similarities Between Gangs, Cults and Terrorist Groups'.
80.   Pyrooz et al., 'Cut from the Same Cloth?'.
81.   Petrich, 'Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine'.
82.   Basra, Neumann and Brunner, 'Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures'.
83.   Challgren et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism'.
84.   Mullins, 'Parallels Between Crime and Terrorism'.
85.   Hamm, 'Prisoner Radicalization'.

similar to Hamm's observations of an insular group, with its own hierarchy and language. Further, the pattern of conversion also appeared to be in line with the argument made by Roberts, who noted that rather than ideology, the gang dynamic and strong social bonds were more significant drivers of religious conversion.[86] The strong gang dynamic possibly also played a more influential role in the conversion of Christian prisoners to Islam. The reasons for the emergence of such dynamics were not immediately clear, but it appeared that prison conditions, especially the level of isolation experienced by the prisoners, might have played a role.

Conclusion

In considering the evidence, the nexus between other criminal activity and VE in the context of the two prison complexes in Kenya appears to be limited. There was limited support for the overlap between crime and VE at the individual or organisational levels, although some evidence of strong gang-related dynamics was found.

In the context of the various methodological restrictions of this study, additional research is needed to investigate these trends. Some efforts in this direction have already been undertaken,[87] and future studies should build on these insights but be mindful of the intricacies of the dynamics, which do not lend themselves well to broadscale generalisations. There is, therefore, a need to study the links between other types of crime and VE in different contexts and to expand on the available evidence base. One strategy would be to study individual communities where there are high rates of criminal activity and also known cases of recruitment and radicalisation to VE.[88] Investigating the links in such contexts would help deepen the understanding and provide much-needed insight into the complex and nuanced relationship between crime and VE. ∎

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86. Roberts, 'The Crime-Terror Nexus'.
87. Petrich, 'Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine'.
88. This is similar to the approach followed by Petrich, and while Petrich studies the Nairobi context, broader generalisations tend to be made that appear to be less persuasive.