

# Stray from the Course:

## Preventing Right-Wing Extremism in the United States

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### ABSTRACT

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Right-wing populist violence has risen to the fore in the West, but U.S. policy is still predominantly focused on the threat of Islamist extremism. However, in 2018 alone, far-right extremists were connected to every extremist-related fatality in the United States. Violent extremists with right-wing convictions have always been present in the United States, but the past decade has seen a steep intensification in violence perpetrated by those attempting to promote far-right ideals. First, this paper will illustrate the actors and scope of the threat of far-right extremism, followed by an analysis of the current U.S. Prevention or Countering Violent Extremism policy. Finally, this paper will examine ways to strengthen the current U.S. policy on countering violent extremism.

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### INTRODUCTION

Right-wing populist-inspired violence has risen in prominence and frequency in the United States in recent years. Despite this rise, U.S. policy is still focused on the threat of Islamist extremism, only recently shifting to counter right-wing extremism. Since September 11, 2001 the United States government has passed multiple action plans with varying definitions of terrorism to mitigate the threat of extremist violence.<sup>1</sup> Terrorism, as defined by the U.S. Department of State, is “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the US Patriot Act defines a terrorist as someone who endangers human life in an act that “appears to be intended to: (i) intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) influence the polity of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping.”<sup>3</sup> Though an exact definition remains ambiguous, the Oxford English Dictionary defines an extremist as “a person who holds extreme political or religious views, especially one who *advocates illegal, violent, or other extreme action*.”<sup>4</sup> Directly after the attacks in 2001, the U.S. government utilized more militarized, kinetic, and “hard” methods under the label of “Counterterrorism” (CT), in an attempt to control the threat of politically motivated violence.<sup>5</sup> These CT efforts often consisted of investigations, prosecutions, imprisonment, and even killing of radicalized individuals.<sup>6</sup> In the past decade and a half, these methods -- while effective at quelling short-term violent Islamist threats -- have proven counterproductive as they serve to fuel more extremism.<sup>7</sup> Violent Islamist extremist recruiters have used these harsh CT methods to their own advantage by framing these policies as evidence that the West is at war with Islam.<sup>8</sup> As many scholarly studies have shown, suppressing violence with violence serves only to incite more violence.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 2010s, the U.S. government implemented a new approach called Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE).<sup>10</sup> Rather than focusing on acts of terror and preventing them through punishment and deterrents, P/CVE doctrine emphasizes the importance of reducing the immediacy of push and pull factors that drive individuals towards committing acts of violent extremism.<sup>11</sup> Push factors include poverty, limited opportunity for social advancement, and feelings of marginalization or unfair treatment by society or the government.<sup>12</sup> These conditions make individuals and communities particularly susceptible to the recruitment strategies of violent extremist or terrorist groups who offer a means to improve their circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, pull factors entice individuals to join a violent extremist group, which can come in the form of a charismatic speaker, an ideological alignment, or a sense of belonging and purpose.<sup>14</sup> Push factors are what make a community receptive to recruitment, whereas pull factors are what actually bring people to join a violent extremist group.

Radicalization is the term applied to the process of coming to believe in and eventually promoting extremist ideologies. However, the connection between radicalization and violent extremism is not as direct as many believe.<sup>15</sup> Not all radicalized people commit acts of violence, and not all violent extremists commit violence because they are radicalized.<sup>16</sup> In fact, recent scholarship has shown that many violent extremists radicalized only after joining a violent extremist group, and not before.<sup>17</sup>

In 2017 alone, far-right extremists were responsible for 59% of extremist-

related fatalities in the United States.<sup>18</sup> “Far-right” thinking is motivated by fear that the individual or community’s way of life is under attack or already lost. 19 Violent extremism under this category, also sometimes referred to as White Supremacist or Right-Wing extremism<sup>20</sup>, is often characterized by racism, nationalism, and a suspicion of centralized government authority.<sup>21</sup> Individuals with these convictions have always been present in the United States, but the past decade has seen a steep intensification in violence perpetrated by those attempting to promote far-right ideals. Over the past decade, 73.3% of all extremist-related fatalities can be linked to domestic right-wing extremists.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, since September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, more U.S. citizens have been killed by far-right extremist violence than by Islamist extremists.<sup>23</sup> U.S. P/CVE policy and scholarship must address the threat of far-right extremism. Increased involvement with the community and more local diversity among those planning and executing policy are the best places to start. Community members are the experts on the drivers which encourage their members to lean towards violent extremism. Not only is their input invaluable in diagnosing and addressing some of these drivers, but community members are also often best placed to implement any recommended changes or programs. Without local community support, no P/CVE program can succeed. Community members are only one part of the necessary diversity for a successful program. Relying exclusively on police experts is dangerous and short-sighted because they are removed from the situation on the ground. Many other experts in diverse fields, as well as practitioners and even former members of violent extremist groups themselves have knowledge and understanding essential to creating and implementing a successful P/CVE program.

## **REVAMP OR RENOVATE: CURRENT U.S. P/CVE POLICY**

Islamist extremists have committed only 23.4% of domestic extremist-related killings in the U.S. since 2008.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, white supremacists and other far-right extremists committed 73.3% of extremist-related killings in the last decade, and the rate is increasing.<sup>25</sup> The number of far-right extremist attacks rose by 31% between 2016 and 2017, and right-wing groups were responsible for 98% of extremist-related deaths in 2018. 26 Statistics like these reveal that far-right extremism is by far the largest domestic terror-related threat to U.S. civilians. The U.S. government is the largest stakeholder in the fight to prevent violence by these actors. At every level, from local police and municipal governments to the various national security agencies, every governmental body has a role to play in countering right-wing extremism. Even non-security offices like the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services have responsibilities in this effort. Aside from the government, civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not only stakeholders but

vital partners in designing and implementing P/CVE programs. Far-right extremists and their supporters should also be included in any P/CVE effort since they are central actors in the P/CVE process. Without their cooperation and buy-in, no P/CVE program will succeed.

The two main pillars of current U.S. P/CVE strategy focus on the community and alternative messaging. Though the third pillar of U.S. CVE policy advocates for addressing the push factors driving radicalization and violent extremism, the government provides little guidance and no metrics for how to achieve that goal.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in his 2018 counterterrorism strategy, U.S. President Donald Trump acknowledged the rise of racially motivated domestic extremism.<sup>28</sup> Despite this encouraging rhetoric, the U.S. government's strategy remained squarely focused on Islamist terrorism until late 2018.<sup>29</sup> Some NGOs, community groups, and local law enforcement agencies took sporadic action against the threat of far-right violent extremism, but there was no centralized, coordinated effort to deal with this rapidly increasing problem until recently.<sup>30</sup> In 2015, the White House reviewed its P/CVE programs and found four missing components in the nation's overall strategy: defined responsibilities, participation of offices and departments beyond the security sector, clear communication both internally and with the public, and assessment and prioritization metrics to determine the allocation of resources.<sup>31</sup> In response, the U.S. government established a CVE taskforce to enact these measures, but a subsequent review by the Government Accountability Office in 2017 found that U.S. CVE efforts still lacked metrics for success and that offices continued to operate in silos, with little cooperation between them.<sup>32</sup> Not only is the U.S. P/CVE strategy insufficient in scope, but the agencies and programs tasked with implementing it have proven incapable of autonomous coordination.

## **FOUNDATION BUILDING: THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN P/CVE**

There are no quick fixes. Kinetic, government-driven efforts like CT offer tangible methods with measurable results, making them attractive to policymakers. Meanwhile, P/CVE is often termed “soft” or “too politically correct”.<sup>33</sup> Research has shown that, despite its less vigorous tone, P/CVE is effective in disincentivizing individuals from radicalizing in the first place, which reduces the overall likelihood of violence.<sup>34</sup> The most effective programs are designed and led by the community itself. However, community-driven programs take time to develop.<sup>35</sup> Violent extremist recruitment and radicalization among displaced youth has been an increasingly common concern among P/CVE professionals.<sup>36</sup> However, a study by the Dubai Initiative found that access to a well-rounded education is the most important factor in reducing radicalization

and recruitment.<sup>37</sup>

A defining feature of far-right extremism is distrust of government and its bodies.<sup>38</sup> This sentiment makes community partnerships all the more important, as members of vulnerable populations are likely already primed to distrust anyone with connections to the government. Respected members of the community like religious or business leaders tend to command more respect than outsiders.<sup>39</sup> P/CVE programs may have allies beyond the public realm as well. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of women in preventing radicalization and violence in their roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends.<sup>40</sup> Though right-wing supporters often espouse misogynistic values, women have a unique perspective on recruitment and radicalization. As mothers, sisters, and friends, women are often overlooked in the role that they play. Female-centered programming emphasizes the role of mothers, sisters, and wives as a first-line defense against radicalization in the home because of their daily contact with family members.<sup>41</sup> They are also frequently early receivers of right-wing violence and may have their own grievances and concerns about extreme views.<sup>42</sup> Women are also active participants when involved in violent extremism.<sup>43</sup> While many of the push factors that drive women to join violent extremist groups or practice violent extremism are the same that drive men in their communities, P/CVE programs must also address the several factors which exclusively affect females.

Compared to the government, members of the public are better informed regarding push factors driving individuals in their community to radicalize and commit violence.<sup>44</sup> Studies have repeatedly shown that targeted, or context-specific, CVE programs are more successful than a one-size-fits-all approach.<sup>45</sup> Community members' local sensitivity and understanding makes them invaluable contributors to creating programs that actually address the root causes of radicalization and violent extremism. These local variations in push factors can span from issues related to poverty, feelings of helplessness about the future, resentment over the perceived impunity of elites, and more.

It is important to remember that these communities are not monolithic entities.<sup>46</sup> Diverse partnerships involving members of the religious, artistic, business, and other communities within the population are vital to reach all facets of the society.<sup>47</sup> This diversity of perspectives also encourages a richer P/CVE program. With their various backgrounds, these community members are able to create programs that not only appeal to the social groups they come from, but incorporate other perspectives for a more holistic, and well-rounded program.

Former extremists and their family members are important voices in P/CVE program design and execution. These individuals are better acquainted with the push and pull factors encouraging radicalization and violent extremism.<sup>48</sup> Not only are they familiar with the drivers, but they understand

how recruiters work. Having been recruited themselves, former members of extremist groups can identify recruitment tactics.<sup>49</sup> This expert knowledge can help families and other community members identify vulnerable individuals for monitoring and deterrence purposes, as well as for developing alternative narratives.<sup>50</sup> Alternative narratives outline possible future paths that address a person or community's push and pull factors in a non-violent way.<sup>51</sup> For example, former extremists can offer their personal stories and perspectives for why they left their organization in order to convince vulnerable individuals not to make the same mistakes.<sup>52</sup> Former extremists also lend credibility to programs and messages aimed at radicalized individuals.<sup>53</sup>

Beyond former extremists and their families, other professionals offer skills and viewpoints that can be valuable to a P/CVE program. For example, criminologists focusing on reducing the drug trade, human trafficking, and gang violence offer a unique perspective on extremist violence.<sup>54</sup> Many extremist groups partake in illegal activities like peddling drugs to fund their organizations, which follows certain patterns a criminologist is trained to analyze.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the structure, personalities, and recruiting techniques of some violent extremist groups share similarities with gangs and other criminal enterprises.<sup>56</sup> Many other disciplines have spent decades establishing bodies of work that could positively inform both the study of violent extremists, and how to de-escalate and eventually re-integrate them into society.<sup>57</sup> Incorporating these diverse perspectives into the study and development of P/CVE programs would encourage best practices and expand the understanding of violence and those who commit it across multiple disciplines, leading to an eventual reduction in violence overall.

Education is another essential element to any CVE program. Extremist narratives often provide a clear-cut, black and white vision of the world. <sup>58</sup> A well-rounded education can problematize that view.<sup>59</sup> Right-wing extremists believe in the supremacy of one race, and often, one gender. Humanizing non-white individuals and encouraging empathy and a sense of shared citizenship interferes with recruiting tactics that attempt to simplify the world into good and evil.<sup>60</sup> Education can also teach critical thinking skills, enabling previously vulnerable populations to question and evaluate the legitimacy of extremist rhetoric and vision.<sup>61</sup> This will reduce the likelihood and frequency with which vulnerable individuals blindly accept extremist rhetoric, and resort to violence.<sup>62</sup> Finally, an ideal education would alleviate the severity of some grievances that can push individuals to a life of extremist violence.<sup>63</sup> One major driver is a lack of employment prospects, but a well-designed education program could both encourage critical thinking, and provide tangible skills the participants can use to find employment.<sup>64</sup> Many non-profit and community organizations already provide services and programs that help with CVE efforts.<sup>65</sup> An important contribution the government can make is to provide funding and support to

existing programs that have proven effective.

Community members and vulnerable populations are not the only stakeholders in need of education. An unfortunate trend among police and security forces is right-wing extremist tendencies, particularly white nationalist beliefs.<sup>66</sup> One report from 2006 identified 320 extremists at Fort Lewis in Washington State, but only two were ever removed.<sup>67</sup> Numerous examples of ex-military or police perpetrating right-wing extremist violence hit the news every year.<sup>68</sup> There are a number of theories as to why this trend exists, often citing similarities in recruitment tactics and push and pull factors, between those drawn to a life of military service and those drawn towards violent extremism.<sup>69</sup> Either way, the disturbing truth is that the U.S. military and local law enforcement both possess radicalized right-wing extremist elements, who occasionally display their extremism violently.<sup>70</sup> This trend not only encourages right-wing extremists to act with impunity and bolsters their convictions, but it also promotes a lack of accountability and attention to right-wing extremist crimes.<sup>71</sup> Before addressing right wing extremism among civilians, it is crucial that the very governmental forces tasked with P/CVE are not sympathetic to extremists' cause.

Government bodies like the police continue to play an important role in P/CVE. Community policing generally involves a reorientation of the force to focus on two-way communication between police and their constituents.<sup>72</sup> As the name implies, the community and its members are central to community policing initiatives. Civil society sets the priorities, and often executes programs to solve criminal problems on their own, with police support but not necessarily overt involvement.<sup>73</sup> Building trust between civilians and the police, and by extension the government, is a fundamental element of community policing efforts.<sup>74</sup> The Baltimore police department, for example, has mandated its officers spend at least half of their ten-hour shift outside of their cars, on foot.<sup>75</sup> Others, like the LAPD Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau, the Loudon County Sheriff and the Montgomery County Police Department recommend their officers attend community events, in uniform. This visibility brings a human face to the uniform, and helps communities visualize the individual officer as a community member and neighbor.<sup>76</sup> Higher level programs can incorporate community training to recognize warning signs of radicalization that inform the community when to seek help, and from whom.<sup>77</sup> Not only do these methods create a rapport and level of trust between vulnerable communities and law enforcement, but that trust can then enable early detection and warning when community members feel comfortable enough to approach the police with their concerns.<sup>78</sup> This trust also reduces the salience of some push factors, such as social marginalization and perceptions of poor government representation.<sup>79</sup>

In Canada, the small city of Lethbridge has been a hotbed of right-wing

extremism and racism in the past.<sup>80</sup> Though scholars researching P/CVE in Canada expected this town to be rife with right-wing extremists, they found the opposite.<sup>81</sup> The community, including law enforcement, members of government and civilian activists, worked together to address grievances through education and public awareness.<sup>82</sup> Norway also utilized community policing in reducing and even dispersing groups of racist violent extremists.<sup>83</sup> In 2003 the Vigrid organization was attracting young Norwegian followers in the name of Odin, an old Nordic god.<sup>84</sup> Norway's police summoned around 100 young people with known ties to the Vigrid organization to the local police station for a conversation on empowerment. After learning more about the organization and its goals, as well as the legal consequences of continued involvement, half of the participants left the organization immediately.<sup>85</sup> This success was predicated on Norway's commitment to community policing, including one to two 'prevention' officers in every small office, and up to ten in police offices covering up to 100,000 citizens.<sup>86</sup>

Weaving together existing private, civilian and NGO programs will ensure that P/CVE efforts and more kinetic crime and terrorism prevention efforts do not work at cross-purposes.<sup>87</sup> One illustrative example of a successful P/CVE program implemented by an NGO took place in Yemen in 2011. A number of local and international NGOs worked to provide the youth in Yemeni refugee camps access to education.<sup>88</sup> Following implementation, studies found that incidents of recruitment by radicalized groups fell almost 100% in students who went through the program.<sup>89</sup> The education program responded to the wishes of the students themselves to be taught by a different organization than the Yemeni government.<sup>90</sup> It is important that these programs are community-directed. Community members are more familiar with the push and pull factors, and with the forms of communication and engagement that will work best. Diverse perspectives in planning and executing P/CVE policy are also important. A group with diverse backgrounds and skills will create a program that is more effective by bringing their multiple viewpoints and experiences to bear. With these principles as a guide, below are recommendations for the authors of U.S. P/CVE policy in the short and medium term.

## **HOW P/CVE CAN IMPACT THE CURRENT THREAT**

Right-wing extremist violence is hurting and killing more Americans every year. The recent expansion of U.S. P/CVE agenda to include non-Islamist threats is a step in the right direction. This extension will enable scholars and practitioners to study and implement programs aimed at a wider range of threats to American security. Incorporating community guidance and ensuring diversity among policy planners and executioners at all levels will increase the number of successful, targeted programs. The United States needs to take



action.

An important element of the U.S. P/CVE strategy in need of amendment is the federal government-centered approach. Though the strategy highlights community engagement as a core principle, the organizations engaging in P/CVE often lack measurement and evaluation criteria, and have very few feedback mechanisms to allow the communities to vocalize their concerns.<sup>91</sup> However, one of the most vital components of a successful P/CVE program is that it is shaped and led by the community. Rather than a top-down approach, the U.S. government must emphasize the importance of community guidance, and create internal structures that enforce that priority.

Another much-needed change in the short term is in regards to recruitment and training of police and military personnel. Federal, state and local government bodies should convene diverse groups of civilian and military or police experts to analyze what draws these right-wing extremists to the various police and military forces. This analysis should focus both on how to prevent radicalized individuals from joining the force and how to decrease their vulnerability to radicalization once on the force. Another important element of this initiative is to create training and other educational programs to convey the importance of preventing right-wing extremism.

Once policymakers expand the definition of violent extremism beyond Islamist threats and build diversity and community guidance into P/CVE structure, they must tackle the larger organization of the U.S. P/CVE strategy. One of the most important and frequently repeated critiques of the current system is that it lacks monitoring and success metrics.<sup>92</sup> In the medium-term U.S. policymakers must address this blatant deficiency. Measurement is one of the largest hurdles for programs that do not deal in absolutes and numbers. It is difficult to state the number of terrorist attacks or incidents of violent extremism that have *not* occurred, let alone the number of American lives a program teaching computer literacy to members of vulnerable populations has saved.

Despite these difficulties, there are programs which have already started developing metrics for success. For instance, RAND researchers propose a violent extremism evaluation measurement (VEEM) framework comprised of methods to measure the levels and changes in violent extremism.<sup>93</sup> This framework identifies five attributes categorizing types of violent extremism, including anger, frustration, levels of connectedness or alienation with society, and a sense of grievance and distrust or rejection of the authorities and society.<sup>94</sup> Analysis of social surveys and other data under the VEEM framework would allow researchers to gauge relative levels of the aforementioned attributes before and during P/CVE program implementation. As a result, this measurement framework would enable researchers to track and better understand the effectiveness P/CVE programs throughout its implementation. Although.

metrics like this assume there is a link between experiencing grievances and turning to violent behavior, which is not yet well established.<sup>95</sup> However, further study of vulnerable populations will enhance the field's understanding of the link between push and pull factors and violence. Successful education, de-radicalization and reintegration programs boast reduced numbers of program participants returning to extremist groups in relation to their peers that did not participate.<sup>96</sup> The P/CVE community should exploit existing measurement and evaluation metrics that members of the community already use, as well as exploring how other related fields like healthcare and law enforcement employ metrics to measure success.<sup>97</sup>

Nationally, all police should receive training in community policing. Though the entire force will not necessarily be tasked with those responsibilities, they should all be aware of the concept and what it entails to ensure that each member of the police force adheres to the overall mission of building trust and rapport with communities. Additionally, law enforcement should utilize information gathered in studies on right wing extremists in law enforcement. The federal, state and local governments should transform their recruitment and training techniques to discourage participation by right wing extremists, or any extremists, in law enforcement. The government should also fund or work with NGOs, libraries, and schools to implement work, training, or skills replacement programs in areas the communities report as grievances. Continued engagement with the community is vital. As P/CVE programs begin to take effect, community members will be able to provide feedback on what is working and why. The government and its partners should continue to study and gather data on vulnerable populations, as well as new and continuing programs. This ever-expanding body of scholarship will aid in the modification and development of more effective programs throughout this period.

Implementing training and community policing programs should reduce the salience of some push factors driving individuals to radicalize and commit violence. Increased trust and cooperation between the various stakeholders and the community will also encourage better reporting from the community. It is important to clarify that P/CVE is not under a security or intelligence mandate. Local reporting in this case merely means that community members should be encouraged to provide tips or information to other P/CVE framework stakeholders with concerns about individuals or groups whenever community efforts have proved insufficient.

This improved communication and interdependence between the community and police will also encourage vulnerable communities to open up more about what is making them vulnerable. When communities and law enforcement work together, they can address grievances and prevent violent extremism in both immediate and long-term cases. This opening and continued study will also generate new knowledge that everyone in the P/CVE field

can use. It will allow stakeholders to develop better, more effective programs, not only in the United States, but among our allies. Because every situation is different and requires a flexible and context-specific response, the more situations scholars can study, the better equipped P/CVE practitioners will be for the next situation.

## **AT THE THRESHOLD: LIMITS OF APPLYING P/CVE**

With roots in peacebuilding, P/CVE scholarship calls upon such academic ancestors as anthropology, military history, and psychology.<sup>98</sup> Though relatively novel, over the past decade P/CVE has proven itself a viable and successful approach to reducing violence by extremists and creating a more peaceful world. One common complaint about P/CVE is that it is ponderous, whereas more kinetic efforts like CT work quickly, and produce obvious, measurable results.<sup>99</sup> This type of long-term commitment can make it difficult for even successful programs to secure funding when coupled with the difficulty of measuring P/CVE success. However, history has shown that CT may work in the short-run, but such violent and repressive policies only cause more problems and encourage more violence in the future. P/CVE may take a long time and its results might be difficult to measure, but over time reducing the salience of push factors through education and other aid programs will reduce the incidents of violent extremists.

It is important for practitioners to continue their studies. Applying findings from other, related disciplines like criminology or peacekeeping will help expand the P/CVE knowledge base without reinventing the wheel. This cross-discipline approach will encourage the development of diverse viewpoints and enable scholarship in all related fields to expand exponentially, building on existing studies and knowledge to eventually create success metrics even the most skeptical policymaker or donor will acknowledge. Increased community engagement and feedback will enable law enforcement to detect threats quickly and efficiently. It will also empower communities to address threats internally with a higher rate of success. This engagement not only makes defending against violent extremism easier, but also reduces grievances that lead to violent extremism, reducing the number of potential incidents and threats as well. Beyond community stakeholders, it is important for P/CVE efforts to involve diverse planners and implementers. This diversity introduces multiple viewpoints and areas of expertise, which produce valuable insights and a more complete P/CVE program. The United States has experienced a number of devastating incidents of violent extremism, but policymakers are taking steps in the right direction. Implementing the recommendations above will improve the U.S. P/CVE strategy even more, and reduce the incidents of violent extremism going forward.

## ENDNOTES

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