6-2022

Facilitating Suspicious Activity Reporting at the Community Level: Family Members’ Observations of Non-Ideological Risk Factors and Signs of Radicalization Among Violent Extremists

Karyn Sporer

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Facilitating Suspicious Activity Reporting at the Community Level

Family Members’ Observations of Non-Ideological Risk Factors and Signs of Radicalization Among Violent Extremists

Report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

June 2022
About this Report

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This report is part of the National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE) project, led by Dr. Gina Scott Ligon, NCITE Program Director.

This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

About NCITE

This new Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence is an academic hub based at the University of Nebraska Omaha focused on bolstering counterterrorism efforts and terrorism and targeted violence prevention. We are 50-plus academics at 18 universities in the U.S. and U.K. working on 16 research projects. The projects will result in innovation, technology, and education for today's counterterrorism workforce and inspire the workforce of the future.

Citations

To cite this report, please use this format:

Overview

David Headley’s pathway to violent radicalization was no secret before he helped plan the 2008 Mumbai attacks that left 166 dead, including six Americans. His ex-girlfriend, wife, friends, and mother all expressed concern about his radicalization to local community members and government agencies, including New York City’s Joint Terrorism Task Force and the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s father, concerned with a disturbing text message from his son in October 2009, raised alarms at the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria two months before his son’s failed underwear bombing of a transatlantic flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day. These cases emphasize an important feature shared by every violent extremist: a network of friends, acquaintances, and family members who are likely the first to observe warning signs of violent radicalization.

Family members in particular play an important part in countering violent extremism (CVE), whether it be with deradicalization and disengagement, or by alerting authorities when concerned for the safety of their loved one(s) and/or others. Given the threat posed by homegrown violent extremists (HVE) in the United States, including the inevitable release of the many convicted terrorists currently incarcerated, a better understanding of the families and homelives of HVE is warranted.

This report is part of the larger NCITE funded project “Facilitating Suspicious Activity Reporting at the Community Level,” which aims to identify how the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other law enforcement agencies can leverage community partnerships to help counter violent extremism and to provide actionable insights on what technological, social, and financial barriers exist for families of extremists in reporting suspicious activities. The findings outlined in this report provide the foundation for reaching these long-term research goals by offering a rich description of the home and family lives of HVE.

The following two research questions will guide the remainder of this report:

(1) What nonideological factors such as adverse childhood experiences and adolescent conduct problems precede participation in violent extremism?

(2) What warning signs of radicalization do family members observe, ignore, and/or (mis)understand?

Methods

Participants & Recruitment

Data used in this report are drawn from in-depth life history interviews with thirteen family members of nine violent extremists. The participants represented nine distinct families and included two fathers, five mothers, two brothers, three sisters, and one
brother-in-law. Their ages ranged from 18 to 66 and they reported a wide range of education level, socioeconomic status, employment, and religious and political affiliations. Of the nine violent extremists, eight were described as Islamic and Salafi Jihadists and one was described as an antifa political activist.

Participant recruitment relied on three strategies. The first strategy was direct contact. The author reached out via email or social media to individuals who publicly self-reported having a radicalized family member (e.g., they have given public talks, written op-eds, etc.). The second strategy involved the non-profit organization Parents for Peace, a non-governmental public health nonprofit that empowers families, friends, and communities to prevent radicalization, violence, and extremism. The author worked with Parents for Peace leadership and staff to share study information with family members who received services and support from the organization who might be willing to participate. The third strategy relied on snowball sampling by which participants shared study information with other family members or potential participants for the study.

**Interviews, Data Collection, & Data Analysis**

Data were collected through in-depth life history interviews, which elicited rich data as a foundation for thick description. Eleven participants were interviewed using a HIPAA-protected Zoom account and two participants were interviewed over the telephone. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to seven hours, with the average interview length at three hours; recordings totaled over 39 hours. The length of time for each interview was predicated on how much content and life-course information was covered and each participant’s availability. All interviews were conducted in one sitting but included at least one break. All audio recordings were transcribed and elicited 847 pages of interview data.

It is important to note that stigma, social isolation, and family denial are primary challenges for researchers to overcome when investigating family deviance. Given that the family is universally accepted as a private institution one that is prone to conceal and/or deny extremism, victimization, and violence it is understandable why such families choose to keep their stories untold. To combat this challenge, researchers should provide a space that promotes open dialogue so that individuals are more likely to discuss their experiences. The life history interview provides such a space. This interviewing strategy is a holistic research methodology that produces rich accounts and close approximations of the family experience by accommodating multiple perspectives. It also promotes rapport, an important variable for fostering open dialogue with an otherwise hard-to-reach population.

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Questions posed to participants were open-ended and focused on helping the participant generate unstructured narrative data that described different facets of their life. Participants were asked to provide a rich and detailed history of their personal and family lives in addition to targeted questions about their family member’s violent radicalization and its aftermath.

Data were analyzed using a modified version of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a flexible, non-linear methodology that allows themes and ideas to emerge during analysis through the process of creating, comparing, and contrasting categories identified in the data. In general, grounded theory requires five steps. The first step involves initial coding, or the reading of entire interview transcripts to obtain analytic ideas to pursue in future interviews and to generate initial memos that help move the codes to broader categories. The second step takes a more focused approach in which larger segments of data are synthesized and analyzed to develop more salient categories and to integrate theoretical ideas related to codes identified in the first stage. The third step includes advancing the memos and refining conceptual categories. The fourth stage of the data analysis elaborates and refines primary themes until they reach theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is the process in which data are elaborated and refined until no new properties emerge. This is imperative as analysis transitions to the fifth stage, which includes sorting and integrating memos and diagraming concepts of the emerging theory. These techniques allow categories to reach a higher level of conceptualization, which improve theory development.

Findings

The data analysis revealed two key findings as they pertain to extremism and radicalization, the family, and the reporting of suspicious behaviors: (1) presence of non-ideological risk factors and (2) observed, missed, and (mis)understood warning signs of radicalization. These findings are compatible with past research on former members of white supremacist groups that suggested different types of family-level instabilities increase the likelihood of various types of negative consequences, including the onset of radicalization. In turn, these instabilities impaired the family system and diminished family members’ capacity to recognize and respond to their relatives’ radicalization.

The following pages are organized into two sections:

(1) Non-ideological risk factors, and

(2) Observed, missed, and (mis)understood warning signs.

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Theme 1: Non-Ideological Risk Factors

Participants reported a wide range of non-ideological risk factors to participation in extremism and each risk factor represented a different stressor that can disrupt a child’s emotional and psychological development (see Table 1). Of the nine extremists, eight (89%) were reported to have experienced one or more of the following adverse environmental conditions: childhood physical abuse (44%), childhood sexual abuse (33%), emotional and physical neglect (22%), parental abandonment (11%), and witnessed serious violence (33%). Participants also reported that their family members were raised in households characterized by substance abuse (22%) and some form of family disruption (44%; i.e., divorce or parents who were never married). Three extremists (33%) were reported to have experienced some form of mental health problem, including suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, prior to their radicalization and extremist participation. One participant (11%) reported a family history of mental health problems.

Table 1  
Early Experiences with Environmental Adversity, Cumulative (by Extremist)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood physical abuse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood sexual abuse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/physical neglect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental abandonment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessed serious violence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household substance abuse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household family disruption</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health problems before/during extremist involvement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of mental health problems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 9

Additionally, the presence of polyvictimization, which refers to having experienced multiple victimizations such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family violence, is another important finding. Of the nine extremists in this study, one (11%) experienced four types of environmental adversity and three (33%) experienced five types of environmental adversity. This is a significant finding and contribution of this study: the clear relationship between polyvictimization, early childhood risk factors, and later violent extremism. In general, while children tend to be resilient, polyvictimization researchers have found exposure to multiple forms of environmental adversity and repeated victimization puts children at greater risk of developing intense and persistent symptoms such as anxiety, depression, anger, and posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as future conduct and behavioral problems. These findings suggest that polyvictimization was a significant issue in the lives of the extremists at the center of this study.

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8 Ibid.
Eight of the nine extremists (89%) were reported to have conduct problems during adolescence (see Table 2). Of these eight, two (22%) experienced four types of conduct problems and two (22%) experienced seven types of conduct problems. In terms of substance use, 44% had problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs, each of whom began experimenting with alcohol and/or drugs before they turned sixteen. In terms of education, 56% were reportedly truant and 56% had academic failure (e.g., persistent inability to complete coursework, failure to matriculate). In terms of aggressive behavior and exposure to the criminal justice system, 33% had police interactions and/or an arrest history, 2% had gang-related interactions, and 78% were reportedly violent at home, school, or in the community. Only one participant's family member reported no conduct problems during adolescence.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conduct Problems during Adolescence, Cumulative (by Extremist)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting with alcohol and/or illegal drugs before 16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic failure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police interactions, arrest history</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting at home, school, and/or in the community</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 9

As it pertains to non-ideological risk factors, the violent extremists, as reported by their family members, had childhoods and homelives characterized by extreme environmental adversity (e.g., polyvictimization, family disruption) and conduct problems during adolescence. These findings highlight the importance of how childhood risk factors and other non-ideological factors might precede violent radicalization. These data also suggest that adverse childhood experiences increase a person's susceptibility to negative outcomes, including violent extremism. In fact, because violent extremism came after exposure to these noted risk factors, one can speculate that radicalization in some cases may be better understood as a coping strategy for a difficult childhood and adolescence.

Theme 2: Observed, Missed, & (Mis)Understood Warning Signs

Each participant reported at least one warning sign during their family member's radicalization. Of the thirteen participants, six (46%) observed imposed beliefs on others, eight (62%) observed increased rigidity/militancy, ten (77%) observed a change in appearance, eleven (85%) observed distancing and isolation from divergent views, ten (77%) observed planned or executed overseas travel to predominantly Islamic nations (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Somalia), and five (39%) observed consumption of extremist propaganda (see Table 3).
Table 3
Observed Warning Signs, by Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impose beliefs on others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased rigidity, militancy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change appearance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance, isolate oneself from those with divergent views</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International travel</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propaganda consumption</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 13

He had started changing himself, totally different, completely different. He was no longer He was changing his name to It’s like wait a minute. You’re changing your clothes. You’re changing your name. You’re changing everything about you.

When I went and spoke to his imam, he gave us a tour of the mosque, and he was downstairs and was away from us and he said, “I notice your son’s enthusiasm in class. I don’t know him very well.” He goes, “But I notice his enthusiasm. And it concerns me. I’m sure you’ve noticed the drastic change in his clothing.” And I said, “Yeah.” And he goes, “That concerns me too… My friends at the mosque in Detroit are concerned about him because he’s harsh and judgmental.”

There was a point where he was really, really wanting us to convert… He really wanted us to convert and he had had one girlfriend for years and years and he wanted her to convert and she just said, “This isn’t for me.” And then he ended that relationship because of that. They were in a relationship, and it was a very settled, sweet relationship. So, toward the end that started happening.

Of the nine extremists, three (33%) imposed their beliefs on others, six (67%) increased their rigidity/militancy, six (67%) changed their appearance, seven (78%) distanced and isolated themselves from those with divergent views, seven (78%) planned to or traveled overseas to a predominantly Islamic nation, and seven (78%) consumed extremist propaganda (see Table 4).

Table 4
Observed Warning Signs, by Extremist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impose beliefs on others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased rigidity, militancy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change appearance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance, isolate oneself from those with divergent views</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International travel</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propaganda consumption</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 9
While these data indicate the observation of many warning signs, an important caveat is understanding or acknowledging the behaviors to be warning signs of radicalization. In other words, family members did not necessarily know that the behaviors were a cause for concern. Participants fell into one of three categories of acknowledgement:

(1) an unfamiliarity of extremism more broadly (i.e., at the time they did not know what extremism was) and thus unaware that the observed behaviors were warning signs of radicalization,

(2) a familiarity of extremism more broadly but unaware that the observed behaviors were warning signs of radicalization, or

(3) a familiarity of extremism more broadly and aware that the observed behaviors were warning signs of radicalization.

Of the 13 participants, five (39%) fell into category one, five (39%) fell into category two, and three (23%) fell into category three (see Table 5). Of the nine extremists, family members of three (33%) fell into category one, three (33%) fell into category two, and three (33%) fell into category three (see Table 6).

**Table 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgement of Warning Signs (WS), by Participant</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaware of WS</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of WS, unaware of severity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of WS, aware this was extremism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N = 13*

**Table 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgement of Warning Signs (WS), by Extremist</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaware of WS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of WS, unaware of severity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of WS, aware this was extremism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N = 9*

I didn’t know what extremism was. I didn’t know what radically, if you’d asked me any of those questions before I would have said, “huh?”

I mean, we didn’t actually realize how serious it had become until the moment when the FBI showed up at our door.

My brother’s radicalization was evident from what he was describing too. One of the things that Shias are known for is their reverence for the family descendants of Muhammad. Twelve saints of Muhammad are counted, as people that are prominent within that belief system. And when you go against that, that’s your first clue that you’re sending out. So that’s when he started speaking against those twelve saints, that’s when, at least the family realized, he’s become a Sunni...the Wahhabis are very fervent, opposite of Shias.
Conclusion & Implications

An important objective of CVE agencies is for community members to recognize and report signs of radicalization before it reaches a violent end. And while the extant literature on radicalization is both vast and nuanced, the findings of this report suggest that prevention must start well before ideological indoctrination. Participants described a variety of adverse childhood experiences and non-ideological risk factors that preceded the family members’ radicalization, rates that far exceed those found in the general population. The participants also observed a myriad of warning signs of radicalization but had different levels of awareness for what those warning signs represented, which thus impacted their ability to appreciate the gravity of the problem as their family member progressed along the radicalization pathway.

A public health approach rather than the more punitive approach favored by the American criminal justice system might be better suited in terrorism prevention when it involves violent extremists and their family members. Such an approach for pre- and early-stage radicalization prevention can draw from widely accepted strategies for preventing adverse childhood conditions:

- Strengthen economic supports for families
- Promote social norms that protect against violence and adversity
- Ensure a strong start for children, enabling them to reach their full potential
- Teach skills to help parents and youth handle stress, manage emotions, and tackle everyday challenges
- Connect youth to caring adults and activities
- Intervene to lessen immediate and long-term harms

In addition to preventing adverse childhood conditions, terrorism prevention within the family context requires increased education and awareness, and decreased stigma and fear. First, as noted in the findings, family members do not always recognize certain behaviors to be a sign of violent radicalization. While we know that changing one’s appearance or trying to convert others is more indicative of fundamentalism rather than violent extremism, an increased awareness of how the accumulation of certain risk factors in concert with other behaviors and experiences (e.g., a cognitive opening) may be dangerous to ignore.10

Second, terrorism prevention requires a reduction in stigma around seeking help with parenting challenges, particularly as it pertains to observed warning signs of radicalization. Future research should consider under what conditions a family member both recognizes and reports radicalization and what barriers exist that impede a family member’s ability or desire to report suspicious behavior(s). One can speculate that family members might

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struggle with the uncertainty of how to best respond to a loved one’s radicalization: should they reach out to mental health providers, educators, religious leaders, or the police? One can also speculate that a barrier to reporting is the overarching fear that any intervention might push the person away or sever the relationship, or that an intervention might lead to an arrest and subsequent incarceration.

Every violent extremist has a social network of family members, friends, and acquaintances. Any prevention program—whether prevention starts in childhood or later in the radicalization process—will need to leverage this network to mitigate the risk of harm, increase knowledge about radicalization and extremism more broadly, and promote the reporting of suspicious behavior.