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## Facilitating Suspicious Activity Reporting at the Community Level

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# Facilitating Suspicious Activity Reporting at the Community Level

Barriers to Acknowledging and Reporting  
Suspicious Behavior Among Family  
Members of Homegrown Violent Extremists

June 2023

**Research Team**

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**About the Report.** The purpose of this report was to identify how the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other law enforcement agencies can leverage community partnerships to help counter targeted violence and to provide actionable insights on what technological, social, and financial barriers exist for families of extremists in reporting suspicious activities.

Questions about this report should be directed to Karyn Sporer at [karyn.sporer@maine.edu](mailto:karyn.sporer@maine.edu).

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**About the Authors.** Karyn Sporer is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Maine. She is an expert in qualitative methods and life history interviewing of hidden and marginalized populations. Her main areas of research are in violent extremism and terrorism, and family violence and victimization.

Brooke Buxton graduated from the University of Maine in 2023 with degrees in Sociology and Psychology. Their research interests are in violent extremism and terrorism, inequality and social stratification, and mental illness and crime.

**About NCITE.** The National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education (NCITE) Center was established in 2020 as the Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence for counterterrorism and terrorism prevention research. Sponsored by the DHS Science & Technology Office of University Programs, NCITE is the trusted DHS academic consortium of over 60 researchers across 26 universities and non-government organizations. Headquartered at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, NCITE is a leading U.S. academic partner for counterterrorism research, technology, and workforce development.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family members play an important part in targeted violence and terrorism prevention (TVTP), 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 research identifies how the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other law enforcement agencies can leverage community partnerships to help counter targeted violence and to provide actionable insights on what technological, social, and financial barriers exist for families of extremists in reporting suspicious activities. This research found significant barriers to mitigating the radicalization process and mobilization to violence, as well as barriers family members confront when acknowledging or reporting suspicious behaviors. These barriers include:

- *Histories of acute violence and trauma.* The majority of the HVE at the center of this study experienced adverse childhood conditions, and presented with conduct problems during adolescence. Collectively, these issues put them 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 (e.g., radicalization). These histories may explain some individuals' susceptibility to radicalization and later mobilization to violence.
- *Missed and misunderstood warning signs.* Family members observed myriad indicators of radicalization and mobilization to violence, yet 43% of the participants in this study were unaware of the severity of the problem, while 57% were either indifferent or nonconfrontational. The most frequently observed indicators were distancing/secretcy, increased religious or political rigidity, attempts to radicalize others, international travel, and propaganda consumption.
- *Interventions and the fear of negative consequences.* Regardless of a family member's understanding of the radicalization process or extremism more broadly, all but one participant employed between two and seventeen interventions to stop the mobilization to violence. However, many participants expressed reluctance to report suspicious behavior due to possible negative consequences.

These barriers suggest 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. While arrest and incarceration are warranted in cases that have reached late-stage planning and mobilization (i.e., mitigation of immediate threat), this research illuminates the need for earlier, trauma-informed care particularly for at-risk youth who are in the early stages of radicalization. Further, for persons incarcerated for terrorism-related charges, regardless of length of sentence, are in urgent need of services that address any history of victimization and trauma.

## OVERVIEW

Family members in particular play an important part in targeted violence and terrorism prevention (TVTP), 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 minimize risk of targeted violence 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 research question will guide the remainder of this report:

- What are the barriers to acknowledging and reporting suspicious behavior among family members of homegrown violent extremists?

## METHODS

### Participants & Recruitment

Data used in this report are drawn from in-depth life history interviews with 23 family members of 16 violent extremists. The participants represented 16 distinct families and included two fathers, seven mothers, six siblings, two intimate partners, five adult children, 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 sixteen violent extremists, eight were described as Salafi-Jihadists, seven were described as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, and one was described as an anarchist violent extremist. See table 1 for participant demographics.

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 as having a radicalized family member (e.g., they have given public talks, written op-eds, etc.). The second strategy involved two non-governmental public health nonprofit organizations, *Life After Hate* and *Parents for Peace*; these organizations empower families, friends, and communities to prevent radicalization, violence, and extremism. The author worked with the organizations’ leadership to share study information with family members who received services and support and might be willing to participate. The third strategy relied on snowball sampling by which participants shared study information with other family members or other 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 (Blumer, 1969; Spradley, 1979). Twenty-one participants were interviewed using a HIPAA-protected Zoom account; two participants were interviewed over the telephone per their request. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to seven hours, with the average interview length at three hours; recordings totaled approximately 65 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 1364 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 (Holt, 2013). 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 (Tracy, 2013). It also promotes rapport, an important variable for fostering open dialogue with an otherwise hard-to-reach population.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

	<i>n</i>	%	M	Range	STD
Gender					
Male	7	30.44	–	–	–
Female	15	65.22	–	–	–
Non-Binary	1	4.35	–	–	–
Age	–	–	42.3	18-66	16.1825
Highest Education Level					
Some High School	1	4.35	–	–	–
Some College	6	26.09	–	–	–
Vocational Degree	3	13.04	–	–	–
College Degree	6	26.09	–	–	–
Postgraduate Degree	5	21.74	–	–	–
Unknown	2	8.70	–	–	–
Socioeconomic Status					
Lower	7	30.44	–	–	–
Lower Middle	1	4.35	–	–	–
Middle	8	34.78	–	–	–
Upper Middle	7	30.44	–	–	–
Political Affiliation					
Democratic Socialist	2	8.70	–	–	–
Liberal/Left-Leaning	4	17.39	–	–	–
Democrat	5	21.74	–	–	–
Independent	4	17.39	–	–	–
Conservative	1	4.35	–	–	–
Libertarian	1	4.35	–	–	–
Other <sup>a</sup>	6	26.09	–	–	–
Religious Affiliation					
Christian	9	39.13	–	–	–
Muslim	4	17.39	–	–	–
Spiritual	1	4.35	–	–	–
Agnostic	5	21.74	–	–	–
Atheist	2	8.70	–	–	–
Unknown	2	8.70	–	–	–
Relation to VE					
Parent	9	39.13	–	–	–
Spouse	2	8.70	–	–	–
Sibling	6	26.09	–	–	–
Child	5	21.74	–	–	–
In-Law	1	4.35	–	–	–
VE Status					
Deceased	4	25.00	–	–	–
Alive/Incarcerated	5	31.25	–	–	–
Alive/Not Incarcerated	7	43.75	–	–	–
VE Ideology					
RMVE	7	43.75	–	–	–
Salafi-Jihadist	8	50.00	–	–	–
AVE	1	6.25	–	–	–

Notes: All demographic information was reported by participants. VE refers to the family member who radicalized. VE refers to the family member who radicalized. All demographic information was reported by participants. RMVE refers to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists; AVE refers to anarchist violent extremists.

*N* = 32, except for VE Status and VE Ideology in which case *N* = 16.

<sup>a</sup> Includes apolitical, unaffiliated, and unknown.

Questions posed to participants were open-ended and focused on helping each 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 (Charmaz, 2014). 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. Initial coding involved the reading of entire interview transcripts to obtain analytic ideas to pursue in future interviews and to generate initial codes. We used both deductive and inductive codes. The former codes were drawn from existing literature (e.g., codes related to non-ideological risk factors and indicators of violent extremist mobilization), while the latter codes emerged from the initial phase of line-by-line data analysis. After these initial codes were developed, we next employed a more focused approach in which larger segments of data were synthesized and analyzed to develop more salient categories and to integrate theoretical ideas related to codes identified in the first stage. The next step included writing and advancing memos, and refining conceptual categories. We continued this process until all memos and codes reached theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is the process in which data are elaborated and refined until no new properties emerge.

## FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed that most of the participants and their families have experienced acute personal and social trauma, which research shows reduces a person’s ability to cope with and recognize possible negative consequences. The analysis also revealed participants often observed myriad indicators of radicalization, yet only some recognized these indicators as a cause for concern.

The following pages are organized into three sections as they pertain to violent radicalization, the family, and the reporting of suspicious behaviors:

- (1) Non-ideological risk factors
- (2) Observed, missed, and (mis)understood warning signs
- (3) Interventions and responses to warning signs

### **Non-Ideological Risk Factors**

#### ***Early experiences with childhood adversity***

Participants reported myriad non-ideological risk factors to participation in extremism and each risk factor represented a different stressor that possibly disrupted their family member’s emotional and psychological development. Table 2 presents cumulative counts of experienced non-ideological risk factors among the violent extremists. Of the sixteen extremists, ten (62.5%) were reported to have experienced one or more of the following adverse environmental conditions: childhood physical abuse (43.75%), childhood sexual abuse (31.25%), emotional and physical neglect (25%), parental abandonment (12.5%), and witnessed serious violence (25%). Participants also reported that their family members were raised in households characterized by substance abuse (12.5%) and some form of family disruption (43.75%; i.e., divorce or parents who were never married, inconsistent housing). Four extremists (25%) were reported to have experienced some form of mental health problem, including suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, prior to their radicalization and extremist participation. Six participants (25%) reported a family history of mental health problems.



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 sixteen extremists in this study, five (25%) can be described as survivors of polyvictimization: two (12.5%) experienced three types of environmental adversity, two (12.5%) experienced four types of environmental adversity, and one (6%) experience six 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 (Finklehor et al., 2011). Furthermore, reported rates of early childhood adversity and polyvictimization are slightly higher among the current sample compared to those in the general population. In a recent report released by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Merrick et al., 2019), 60.9% of adults reported experiencing one type of ACE in their lifetime compared to 62.5% in the current sample; and 15.6% experienced four or more types of adverse childhood conditions compared to 18.5% in the current sample. These findings suggest that early childhood adversity and polyvictimization are significant issues in the lives of the extremists at the center of this study.

Table 2. *Early experiences with environmental adversity, cumulative by extremist.*

	<i>n</i>	%
Childhood physical abuse	7	43.75
Childhood sexual abuse	5	31.25
Neglect (emotional, physical, education, medical, food insecurity)	4	25.00
Parental incarceration	1	6.25
Parental abandonment	2	12.50
Parental divorce	7	43.75
Household family disruption	7	43.75
Witness serious violent at home or in the community	4	25.00
Household substance abuse	2	12.50
Traumatic death of a family member	4	25.00
Bullied, ostracized by peers	4	25.00
Mental health problems before involvement in extremism	4	25.00
Family history of mental health problems	6	37.50

*N* = 16

### **Conduct problems during adolescence**

Twelve of the 16 extremists (75%) were reported to have conduct problems during adolescence (see Table 3). In terms of substance use, 31.25% 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, 31.25% were reportedly truant and 50% 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, 18.75% had police interactions and/or an arrest history, 18.75% had gang-related interactions, and 43.75% were reportedly violent at home, school, or in the community. While four participants’ family members reported no conduct problems during adolescence, two were children of a violent extremist and admittedly were unaware of their parent’s complete life history.

Table 3. *Conduct problems during adolescence, cumulative by extremist.*

	<i>n</i>	%
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Academic failure	8	50.00
Truancy	5	31.25
Early consensual sexual experiences	1	6.25
Fighting at home, school, or community	7	43.75
Gang involvement	3	18.75
Police interactions, arrest history	3	18.75
Experimenting with alcohol and/or illegal drugs before 16	5	31.25
Problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs	5	31.25
Theft, criminality	1	6.25
Episodic or chronic runaways	1	6.25

N = 16

### Observed, Missed, & (Mis)Understood Warning Signs

Indicators of violent extremist mobilization are “observable behaviors that could help determine whether individuals or groups are preparing to engage in violent extremist activities” (NCTC, 2021, pg. 2). While this report does not provide an extensive review of each of the 46 indicators identified in the 2021 NCTC report, special attention is paid to those most prevalent in the life histories.

Each participant reported observing at least one indicator of violent extremist mobilization (see Table 4). Thirteen (56.52%) of the participants observed between one and five indicators, and the remaining ten participants (43.48%) observed between six and ten indicators.

Table 4. Observed indicators, by participant and by violent extremist ideology.

	Participant		Violent Extremist									
			AVE		MVE		REMVE-P		REMVE-R		Total	
	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	%	<i>n</i> <sup>b</sup>	%	<i>n</i> <sup>c</sup>	%	<i>n</i> <sup>d</sup>	%	<i>n</i> <sup>e</sup>	%	<i>n</i> <sup>f</sup>	%
Founded extremist group	4	17.39	1	100.00	1	33.33	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	12.50
Joined extremist group	2	8.70	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	25.00	1	12.50	2	12.50
Attended extremist events	10	43.48	1	100.00	3	100.00	3	75.00	0	0.00	7	43.75
Emotional change	7	30.43	0	0.00	1	33.33	0	0.00	4	50.00	5	31.25
Distant/secretive	15	65.22	1	100.00	1	33.33	1	25.00	6	75.00	9	56.25
Increased religious rigidity	8	34.78	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	5	62.50	5	31.25
Increased political rigidity	8	34.78	0	0.00	2	66.67	4	100.00	1	12.50	7	43.75
Attempt or success in radicalizing other	5	21.74	1	100.00	2	66.67	0	0.00	1	12.50	3	18.75
Impose beliefs on others	7	30.43	0	0.00	1	33.33	0	0.00	3	37.50	4	25.00
Changed name	4	17.39	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	37.50	3	18.75
Changed appearance	7	30.43	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	5	62.50	4	25.00
Propaganda consumption	10	43.48	0	0.00	2	66.67	3	75.00	3	37.50	8	50.00
Propaganda sharing	1	4.35	0	0.00	1	33.33	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	6.25
Isolate from divergent views	7	30.43	1	100.00	2	66.67	0	0.00	1	12.50	4	25.00
Expressed QAnon-related beliefs	5	21.74	1	100.00	2	66.67	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	18.75

Attended Jan. 6	9	39.13	1	100.00	2	66.67	3	75.00	0	0.00	6	37.50
International travel	11	47.83	1	100.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	75.00	6	37.50
Total observed indicators	-	-	9	-	21	-	15	-	39	-	-	-
1-5 indicators	13	56.52	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	56.25
6-10 indicators	10	43.48	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	43.75

Notes. AVE refers to anarchist violent extremists; MVE refers to militia violent extremists; REMVE-P refers to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists who use political justifications; REMVE-R refer to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists who use religious justifications.  
<sup>a</sup> n = 23, <sup>b</sup> n = 1, <sup>c</sup> n = 3, <sup>d</sup> n = 4, <sup>e</sup> n = 8, <sup>f</sup> n = 16

Of the twenty-three participants, seven (30.43%) observed imposed beliefs on others, eight (34.78%) observed increased political rigidity, eight (34.78%) observed increased religious rigidity, four (17.39%) observed a change in name and seven (30.43%) observed a change in appearance, fifteen (65.22%) observed distancing and secrecy, while seven (30.43%) observed isolation from divergent views. Eleven (47.83%) observed planned or executed overseas travel to predominantly Islamic nations (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Somalia), and ten (43.48%) observed consumption of extremist propaganda.

Of the sixteen violent extremists, nine (56.25%) were observed to have engaged in between one and five indicators, and seven (43.75%) were observed to have engaged in between six and ten. The top four observed indicators across ideology were distancing/secrecy (56.25%), propaganda consumption (50%), attending political or extremist events (43.75%; e.g., rallies, cross burnings), and increased political rigidity (43.75%).

While the above 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 four categories of acknowledgement:

- (1) Unfamiliar with extremism (i.e., did not know they were observing indicators).
- (2) Familiar with extremism but not concerned because they *did not understand* the severity and/or the ideology.
- (3) Familiar with extremism but not concerned because they *sympathized* with the ideology.
- (4) Familiar with extremism but not concerned despite *not sympathizing* with the ideology.

Of the twenty-three participants, five (21.74%) fell into category one, five (21.74%) fell into category two, one (4.35%) fell into category three, and twelve (52.17%) fell into category four (see Table 5).

Table 5. Acknowledgement of indicators, by participant.

	n	%
Unfamiliar with extremism (i.e., did not know they were observing indicators)	5	21.74
Familiar with extremism but not concerned because they <i>did not understand</i> the severity and/or the ideology	5	21.74
Familiar with extremism but not concerned because they <i>sympathized</i> with the ideology	1	4.35
Familiar with extremism but not concerned despite <i>not sympathizing</i> with the ideology	12	52.17

N = 23

Table 6. *Interventions and Responses, by participant and by extremist.*

	Participant		Extremist	
	<i>N</i> <sup>b</sup>	%	<i>N</i> <sup>c</sup>	%
Expressed concern/disapproval	17	73.9	13	81.25
Contacted authorities	9	39.1	8	50.00
Hired private investigators/detectives	2	8.7	1	6.25
Reported concerns to family/friends	5	21.7	4	25.00
Reported concerns to therapist/counselor	3	13	3	18.75
Reported concerns to community (school, religious leaders)	3	13	2	12.50
Discouraged travel	6	26.1	5	31.25
Restricted access to extremist materials	3	13	3	18.75
Challenged/confronted beliefs	8	34.8	8	50.00
Inadvertent Push Factors <sup>a</sup>	4	17.4	3	18.75
Self-Preservation				
Participant separated from/divorced VEO	4	17.4	2	12.50
Participant left the home/VEO but remained in contact w/ VEO	6	26.1	4	25.00
Participant left the home/VEO and went no contact w/ VEO	1	4.3	1	6.25
Participants convinced other family members to leave VEO	3	13	1	6.25

<sup>a</sup> Inadvertent push factors refers to the idea that participants did not know that support mechanisms unintentionally facilitated or promoted their family member's eventual violent radicalization.  
<sup>b</sup> *N* = 32, <sup>c</sup> *N* = 16

## Interventions & Responses to Warning Signs

In response to the observed indicators, all but one family member attempted to stop the mobilization to violence (see Table 6). For the participant who did not intervene, they became aware of their family member's radicalization soon after their mobilization to violence that led to extensive damage and loss of life. For the rest of the sample, and regardless of their degree of acknowledgement, each family member attempted to mitigate their family members mobilization to violence. Regarding interventions, seventeen participants (73.9%) expressed concern or disapproval, eight (34.8%) challenged or confronted their family member's extremist beliefs, and three (13%) attempted to restrict access to extremist materials. Participants also reported concerns to family/friends (21.7%), therapists/counselors (13%), and notable community resources (e.g., teachers, religious leaders; 13%). Interesting to note is that nine family members (39.1%) contacted authorities, including local police or the FBI.

In addition to attempts to mitigate or stop the mobilization to violence, participants also managed their own immediate safety and/or mental health. Of the twenty-three participants, four spouses/intimate partners separated from or divorced the violent extremist, and seven other family members left home and either ceased contact (4.3%) or maintained some degree of contact (26.1%).

The participants reported different long-term outcomes and interactions with agents of the criminal justice system (see Table 7). Of the twelve violent extremists, four (25%) died as a direct result of their violent radicalization, three (18.75%) are incarcerated as a direct result of their violent radicalization, one (6.25%) has been arrested and is pending trial for terrorism-related charges, one (6.25%) is living in the community after an arrest for terrorism-related charges, six (37.5%) are living in the community with no arrest or incarceration history, and one (6.25%) is currently living abroad in a combat zone.

Table 7. *Long-term outcomes and interactions with agents of the criminal justice system among the violent extremists.*

	<i>n</i>	%
Death (direct result of extremism participation)	4	25.00
Incarcerated for terrorism-related charges	3	18.75
Arrested, pending trial	1	6.25
Living in community post arrest or incarceration	1	6.25
Living in community with no arrest or incarceration history	6	37.50
Living abroad in combat zone	1	6.25
<hr/>		
FBI Involvement	12	75.00
Local police involvement	6	37.50

*Note.* Reported at time of the interview unless changes were reported to author.  
*N* = 12

## CONCLUSION

An important objective of targeted violence and terrorism prevention 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 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.

There are three major takeaways from this research. First, the family members described how different types of family-level instabilities increased the likelihood of various types of negative consequences including the onset of radicalization. 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. In addition to virtually every violent extremist having experienced a serious adverse childhood condition, 25% were survivors of polyvictimization (experienced multiple victimizations such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, exposure to family violence, etc.). Taken together, these instabilities impaired the family system and diminished the family members’ capacity to recognize and respond to the radicalization.

Second, family members described a general lack of awareness or indifference specifically related to the ideology and extreme rhetoric and behavior, which also diminished the capacity for relatives to recognize and/or appreciate the severity of the problem. The participants observed myriad warning signs of radicalization but had different levels of awareness for what those warning signs represented. For example, 75% of family members of Islamic extremists either did not know what violent radicalization was or they did not understand the severity of their family members’ ideological commitment.

Third, related to lack awareness, participants struggled with the uncertainty of how to best respond once they did recognize the problem. Specifically, family members were nervous that any intervention would further alienate their loved one. Nonetheless, the data analysis revealed family members most often intervened in at least one of the following ways: verbally expressed concern/disapproval, contacted authorities, hired a private investigator, discouraged travel, and sought psychological/therapeutic support. An interesting finding, and one that warrants further investigation, is the idea of “inadvertent push factors.” A number of parents whose child converted to Islam

and later radicalized reflected on how, at first, they were relieved to see their child improve (emotionally, socially, etc.), and they subsequently supported their child's conversion, religiosity, and commitment to their new faith. While these preliminary findings need further analysis, they will surely add important contexts and explanatory power to future end-user deliverables and policy recommendations.

These barriers suggest 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. While arrest and incarceration are warranted in cases that have reached late-stage planning and mobilization (i.e., mitigation of immediate threat), this research illuminates the need for earlier, trauma-informed care particularly for at-risk youth who are in the early stages of radicalization. Further, for persons incarcerated for terrorism-related charges regardless of length of sentence are in urgent need of services that address any history of victimization and trauma, including prevention that draws from widely accepted strategies for preventing adverse childhood conditions (Center for Disease Control, n.d.).

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 (Bergen, 2016). Future research should examine the relationship between observed indicators, acknowledgement, and subsequent outcomes. For example, an important question is why and how do family members who sympathize with a particular extremist ideology try to stop their loved one from mobilizing to violence? Another question that emerged from this research is to what degree do family members need or rely on the criminal justice system to stop the violent radicalization process?

Relatedly, 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 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 it 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.

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