

**HOMEGROWN VIOLENT EXTREMISM  
BACKGROUND, RADICALIZATION AND COUNTERING VIOLENT  
EXTREMISM**

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**InfoBrief**



**International Public Safety Association**

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## Homegrown violent extremism defined

To explore and intelligently examine homegrown violent extremism, it is necessary to define the term. An apparently direct and foundational task, but a task not without controversy. Like many multifaceted public policy issues facing the public safety community, establishing a definition is necessary. Defining HVE requires a larger contextual review of previous research to establish a baseline definition. That context includes the role of terrorism in western democratic societies<sup>i</sup>.

Bruce Hoffman (2006) noted that, “all terrorism involves the quest for power: power to dominate and coerce, to intimidate and control and ultimately to effect fundamental political change. Violence (or the threat of violence) is thus the sine qua non of terrorists<sup>ii</sup>.” Lynn Davies (2016) noted that, “given the multiplicity of types of extremism (political, ethnic, sectarian, separatist, criminal), there are no internationally agreed definitions of extremism, nor of violent extremism, nor therefore of what countering violent extremism or preventing violent extremism actually targets. It is like trying to nail jelly to a wall.<sup>iii</sup>”

While HVE may closely resemble the challenge inherent in resolving any problem, the United States Department of Homeland Security<sup>iv</sup> did assert a definition for HVE:

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*A homegrown violent extremist (HVE) is a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the United States or its territories who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically-motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization but is acting independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization. HVEs are distinct from traditional domestic terrorists who engage in unlawful acts of violence to intimidate civilian populations or attempt to influence domestic policy without direction from or influence from a foreign actor.*

*-United States Department of Homeland Security-*

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## Prevalence

It would be incredibly valuable for all first responders and the public safety community to fully understand the prevalence of HVE today, however and unfortunately, there is a lack of consensus and strategy about how to measure and scale the ubiquity of HVE.

In a Council of Foreign Relations Report,<sup>v</sup> the absence of an operationalized common definition of terrorism among domestic law enforcement and intelligence agencies, results in the absence of reliable data base to authoritatively determine the prevalence of such activities within the U.S.

Furthermore, in April 2017, the Government Accountability Office<sup>vi</sup> indicated that there is a lack of a cohesive strategy or process for assessing the overall CVE effort at the national level.

The Brookings Institution noted recently that, "To combat the enduring appeal of Salafi jihadism, the U.S. government and its allies have devoted an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources to counter violent extremism. At the U.N. General Assembly in September 2014, former President Barack Obama called on nations to do more to counter violent extremism, and in February 2015, he convened a White House summit on the topic. There is a CVE Task Force hosted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and co-led with the U.S. Department of Justice.

Following bipartisan congressional support for the CVE Act of 2015, a new CVE office was established at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. At the U.S. Department of State, the Bureau of Counterterrorism was renamed the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Additionally, there have been several important multilateral and international initiatives, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum and the Hedayah Center in Abu Dhabi.<sup>vii</sup>

Despite these issues identified by the Council of Foreign Affairs and the GAO, the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness provides some insight and analysis into 75 individuals classified as HVEs in the U.S. They reviewed the actions, group affiliations and other unique characteristics of these extremists. The analysis indicates that approximately 30 percent of the extremists discovered by authorities were either plotting attacks on the U.S. or caught after successfully conducting them. A portion of these individuals, about four percent, fled overseas. The remaining were arrested or killed by authorities. Nearly half of the extremists attempted in some way to travel overseas, in many cases to receive training or resources from foreign terror groups.

Former FBI Director James Comey noted in his statement to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on October 8, 2015 that, "we are confronting the explosion of terrorist propaganda and training on the Internet. It is no longer necessary to get a terrorist operative into the United States to recruit. Terrorists, in ungoverned spaces, disseminate poisonous propaganda and training materials to attract troubled souls around the world to their cause. They encourage these individuals to travel, but if they can't travel, they motivate them to act at home. This is a significant change from a decade ago."<sup>viii</sup>

Comey expanded upon his remarks before a Conference of State Attorney Generals in October 2015<sup>1</sup>.

"I have home-grown violent extremist investigations in every single state," Comey told a meeting of state attorneys general. "Until a few weeks ago, there was (sic) 49 states. Alaska had none, which I couldn't quite figure out, but Alaska has now joined the group. So, we have investigations of people in various stages of radicalizing in all 50 states."

Comey said the terror threat has "metastasized" in recent years, as the "progeny of Al Qaida take root" in safe havens such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya, using the Internet and social media to spread their propaganda and recruitment "at the speed of light."

"So why do I tell you this?" Comey asked. "To explain to you why this remains at the top of the FBI's list, and to explain to you why the conversations I have with our state and local partners in all 50 states matters so much today."

"Because ISIL in particular is putting out a siren song through their slick propaganda, through social media, that goes like this: 'Troubled soul, come to the Caliphate; you will live a life of

glory; these are the apocalyptic end times; you will find a life of meaning here fighting for our so-called Caliphate. And if you can't come, kill somebody where you are."

Attacks need not be large-scale to advance the terrorists' mission. Comey also said it's "highly unlikely" that a federal agent will be the first to hear about suspicious behavior: "It's going to be a deputy sheriff," he said. "It's going to be a police officer who knows that neighborhood."

-FBI Director James Comey-

## Radicalization

While extremism is a necessary precursor to radicalization, the pathway is not limited to any one ideology. Several identified components contribute to the evolution from a follower of extremist ideology to a terrorist. These components include an alienated individual, a legitimizing ideology and an enabling community. Of these, the community is most susceptible to positive influence in terms of disrupting recruitment and radicalization.

Research indicates that the Internet provides common access to a wide range of society that enables interaction between recruiters and those recruits who may have been unavailable. These skilled recruiters use the full spectrum of modern communication tools including the Internet and the panoply of social media platforms to establish dialog with these recruits.

Recent RAND<sup>ix</sup> research supports the suggestion that the Internet may enhance opportunities to become radicalized and provide a greater opportunity than offline interactions to confirm existing beliefs. However, their evidence does not necessarily support the suggestion that the Internet accelerates radicalization or replaces the need for individuals to meet in person during their radicalization process.

Examples:

- Helen Pidd, "Anders Behring Breivik Spent Years Training and Plotting for Massacre," The Guardian, August 24, 2012, [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/24/anders-behring-breivik-profile-oslo](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/24/anders-behring-breivik-profile-oslo)
- Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "A Pre-Trial Profile of Anders Behring Breivik," CTC Sentinel 5, no. 3 (March 2012), [www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-pre-trialprofile-of-anders-behring-breivik](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-pre-trialprofile-of-anders-behring-breivik), translation quoted from "Les de psykiatriske rapportene om Breivik [Read the Psychiatric Reports of Breivik]," VG Nett(no date).
- Majority and Minority Staff of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism (Washington, DC: United States Senate, 2012), [www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT%281%29.pdf](http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/CHESSER%20FINAL%20REPORT%281%29.pdf)

In addition to the Internet, recruiters have used online message boards, chat rooms and dating sites to meet and interact with one other and spread their messages. An important element of the radicalization process is recruiter's use of the social media which enables an active few to appear to be a much larger group.

The education system, schools, colleges and universities, may be able to provide available spaces to counter the evolution from radicalized individual to violent extremist. Within the enabling constraints of rights, schools can foster the value in pluralism and integrative complexity to build resilience to singular messages.

The enduring value of education in countering violent extremism was highlighted by Malala Yusufzai<sup>x</sup> in her speech at the United Nations. She stated that, “The extremists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them...That is why they are blasting schools every day. Because they were, and they are afraid of change, afraid of the equality that we will bring into our society.”

Schools can build that confidence to argue, disagree, agree with teachers, authorities, leaders and potential manipulators. And they can enable such encounters, networking and platforms across schools and other agencies to generate the necessary diversity.

### **Countering violent extremism**

The effectiveness of the recruitment techniques is dependent upon the skill of the recruiter, the receptiveness of the recruit and the social context in which the recruit lives during the period of recruitment. Former President Barack Obama made countering violent extremism a goal of his administration and convened a 2015 White House Summit, which was just one element of this campaign.

Countering violent extremism encompasses the preventative aspects of counterterrorism as well as interventions to undermine the attraction of extremist movements and ideologies that seek to promote violence.<sup>xi</sup> CVE efforts address the root causes of extremism through community engagement, including the following programs:

1. Building awareness to include briefings on the drivers and indicators of radicalization and recruitment to violence;
2. Countering extremist narratives to directly address CVE recruitment narratives, such as encouraging civil society-led counter narratives online; and
3. Emphasizing Community Led Intervention by empowering community efforts to disrupt the radicalization process before an individual engages in criminal activity.<sup>xii</sup>

While public safety officials need to make a coordinated effort to address HVE, the real success will require participation from local, state and federal elected and appointed officials and the community’s informal leaders, such as clerics, physicians, teachers and citizens to provide on-going, visible support. Building a successful HVE awareness program requires both careful planning, tailored outreach and near constant maintenance by program leaders. Effective programs will take time, budgetary support, dedicated efforts by committed professionals, para-professionals and concerned citizens. There will be challenges for measuring the program’s success and establishing accurate measurement for effectiveness, however, these are common challenges in a lot of social programs. The key is to establish agreed upon measures of success that are both tangible and intangible.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> This InfoBrief was developed by the International Public Safety Association's Executive Director's HVE Policy Task Force. Members included Tabitha Beaton, Thomas Engells, Michael Lugo, Allison Knox and Heather R. Cotter.

<sup>ii</sup> Hoffman is a leading expert on terrorism. His 2006 encyclopedic work is [Inside Terrorism](#). New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Lynn Davies, (2016). "Wicked Problems: How Complexity Science Helps Direct Education Responses to Preventing Violent Extremism." *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 4 (2016): 32-52.

<sup>iv</sup> Department of Homeland Security (2011). Domestic Terrorism and Homegrown  
<https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-ExtremismLexicon.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Jonathan Masters (2011) "Militant Extremists in the United States" Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder.  
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/militant-extremists-united-states>

<sup>vi</sup> Government Accountability Office (2017) Countering Violent Extremism: Actions Needed to Define Strategy and Assess Progress of Federal Efforts GAO-17-300: Published: Apr 6, 2017. Publicly Released: Apr 6, 2017.  
<http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-300>

<sup>vii</sup> Robert McKenzie (2016) Countering violent extremism in America: Policy recommendations for the next president. Brookings Policy Recommendations  
<https://www.brookings.edu/research/countering-violent-extremism-in-america-policy-recommendations-for-the-next-president/#footnote-22>

<sup>viii</sup> James Comey (2015) Statement Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Washington, D.C. October 8, 2015 <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/threats-to-the-homeland>

<sup>ix</sup> RAND Europe Research led by Ines von Behr explored links between radicalization and the use of the internet/.<https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/internet-and-radicalisation.html>

<sup>x</sup> Malala Yusufzai, "Malala's Speech," United Nations, New York, July 12, 2013  
available at: [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/malala\\_speech.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/malala_speech.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> White House Office of the Press Secretary, February 18, 2015, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism)

<sup>xii</sup> Dr. Erroll Southers is former Presidential nominee for Assistant Secretary of the TSA, Deputy Director in the California Office of Homeland Security and FBI Special Agent. He also serves as Adjunct Professor of Homeland Security and Public Policy in USC's Price School of Public Policy. His dissertation outlines the community based model to counter HVE, see his 2013 USC dissertation, Homegrown violent extremism: Designing a community based model to reduce the risk of recruitment and radicalization  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1497967881>