



The Rise of Radicalization: Is the U.S. Government Failing to Counter International and Domestic Terrorism?

Written Testimony of
Seamus Hughes
Deputy Director, Program on Extremism
Center for Cyber and Homeland Security
George Washington University

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security
July 15, 2015

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am the Deputy Director of George Washington University's Program on Extremism, a new academic initiative inside the university's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security. Our mandate is to explore complex issues such as terrorism, radicalization, and countering violent extremism through a non-partisan and empirical approach.

Prior to joining the Program, I spent over three years as a lead National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) staffer on countering violent extremism issues. With my colleagues in three other departments, we held dozens of engagement events around the country and worked with community partners on preventing individuals from joining groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). My testimony today is informed by these personal experiences on the forefront of this new policy challenge.

Countering Violent Extremism, commonly referred to as CVE, is an inherently amorphous term. It can be described as measures aimed at preventing individuals from radicalizing and reversing the process of those who have already radicalized. The effort is fraught with civil rights and civil liberties concerns.

Yet CVE, if properly implemented, can help sway young people from radicalizing, thereby saving lives and enabling law enforcement to concentrate on those who have made the leap into violent militancy. On the other hand, if improperly implemented, CVE can have an adverse effect on building trust with communities. It is a delicate exercise but one that I believe government and communities have a moral responsibility to attempt.

At least 200 U.S. persons have travelled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict. This year, nearly 50 were arrested and charged with various terrorism-related offenses. Even more disturbing, a number of those who have attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq are minors. I interviewed some of those who have been charged, talked with families of “missing” children, and met with religious and civic leaders throughout this country. The status quo of either doing nothing with radicalized individuals or locking them away for 25 years is untenable. It is incumbent on us to provide those concerned about their loved ones a middle way. Properly implemented CVE programs could provide that alternative while simultaneously alleviating the burden of cases law enforcement has to address.

Over the last decade, governments throughout the world have invested substantial resources in devising CVE strategies. The United States has somewhat lagged behind in creating a comprehensive CVE approach, instead focusing on a series of isolated programs and episodic outreach efforts. Though the US has a domestic CVE strategy, its efforts are disjointed and underfunded. Several overlapping reasons account for this deficiency, including:

- the limited number of terrorism cases in the US;
- the confusion generated by the overlap of several agencies dealing with radicalization-related issues in various jurisdictions;

- a national culture, reinforced by core constitutional values protecting freedom of conscience, that does not believe law enforcement should grapple with ideological and even indirectly religiously-related issues.

The Boston Marathon bombing, and later the rise of ISIS, triggered a renewed focus on CVE, culminating in the February 2015 high-profile White House summit. Part of the revamped effort includes pilot programs in three cities, each with a distinct approach: Minneapolis-St. Paul's focused on societal-level concerns, Los Angeles' on community engagement, and Boston's on interventions with radicalized individuals.

The administration's well-meaning CVE strategy faces key challenges:

- Lack of funding: Resources devoted to CVE have been highly inadequate, and CVE units within each relevant agency remain understaffed.
- Lack of lead agency: Current CVE efforts appropriately involve an array of agencies at the national and local levels. Yet there needs to be a single responsible point of contact for coordination, public advocacy matters, and congressional oversight.
- A singular focus on one form of extremism: The recent terrorist attack in Charleston, South Carolina was a painful reminder, if there was ever a need, that Islamist extremism is hardly the only form of extremism that poses a threat. This should not be an either/or proposition. CVE has to be expanded to address other forms of extremism.
- Resistance from Muslim communities: Successful CVE efforts need support from a broad community cross-section. Some American Muslim civic groups embrace CVE efforts, while others decry it as a surveillance ruse or an effort that singles out American Muslims. In addressing these concerns, the U.S. government would do well to listen not just to the most vocal voices but also grassroots organizations at the local level.

CVE trends in various European countries, where authorities have implemented ambitious strategies for over a decade, offer useful pointers to U.S. officials.¹ European authorities consider individual interventions a crucial part of their counterterrorism efforts, as they are relatively cost-effective and easier to evaluate. For example, in the Danish city of Aarhus an innovative program to rehabilitate dozens of returning foreign fighters seems to have shown encouraging preliminary successes, with only a few going back to militancy.

Because the radicalization process is complex and highly variable, European de-radicalization efforts seek to tailor interventions to each situation. This complicates efforts to develop broad national programs with easily replicable best practices. It also requires investing time to set up a network of community leaders with appropriate competencies.

¹ Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *Countering Violent Extremism in America*, June 16, 2015. Available at: <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/CVE%20in%20America%20.pdf>

The U.S. does not need to replicate Europe's most ambitious CVE efforts, as it faces a significantly smaller radicalization challenge. General preventive measures, particularly those promoting socio-economic development, should be implemented only in limited cases, as communities generally enjoy high levels of integration. Engagement and other trust-building initiatives are useful and should be continued. Officials increasingly see the importance of expanding CVE's focus on community engagement to include targeted interventions with individuals who have become radicalized but have not mobilized to violence. Nonetheless, these targeted interventions so far have been deployed at the whim of local authorities, rather than via an articulated and tested methodology.

At this stage, the most pressing need is for the administration to build a carefully crafted system for interventions as a potential alternative to prosecution. Working with civil rights advocates and experts in alternatives to incarceration, the government should create legal and policy guidance on minimum standards for intervention efforts that address the specific roles of government and communities, as well as the legal parameters of interveners who currently place themselves at risk of liability if interventions go awry. While interventions are best implemented at the local level, they require a high-level framework and clear guidance from federal officials.

Let me close with a general observation. There are violent extremists who should be arrested and put away for a considerable time. Our intelligence and law enforcement community does a great job at that and should be commended for it. But there is also a subset of individuals that are still persuadable and who can be reached before they make a choice that will irrevocably alter the government's ability to take any action other than arrest.

CVE should never be about criminalizing beliefs. Instead, it is, at its core, about protecting our communities and safeguarding vulnerable individuals who are still reachable. In the course of my career, I have had the opportunity to talk with the fathers, mothers, and friends of young men and women who left this country to go to conflict zones. Professionally, as a government official, and personally, as a father, there was an intense sense of both sorrow and regret that we couldn't reach those kids – many of them barely old enough for a driver's license - before they got on the plane. We need to address this shortfall in our counterterrorism approach. We have a responsibility to prevent more families from going through the same tragedy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I welcome any questions.

The views expressed are my own and do not represent the position of the NCTC, the Intelligence Community, or the U.S. Government.