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THE CHALLENGE AND PROMISE OF USING COMMUNITY POLICING STRATEGIES TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A Call for Community Partnerships with
Law Enforcement to Enhance Public Safety

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than four years ago, the White House issued a national strategy calling for the development of partnerships between police and communities to counter violent extremism. This report contains the results of a comprehensive assessment of the challenges and promise of this strategic approach to preventing violent extremism. It is based on a nationwide survey of law enforcement agencies and hundreds of hours of interviews and site visits with police departments and community members around the country.

Based on this research, we reached two fundamental conclusions. First, policing agencies face multiple obstacles to creating community partnerships focused on preventing acts of violent extremism. But, second, some policing agencies are following a set of promising practices which, if applied effectively, can result in increasing trust between the police and the communities they serve. These trusting relationships can serve as a platform for addressing many public safety threats, including, but not limited to, violent extremism.

The Challenge

Policing agencies are unlikely to be successful in creating partnerships to address violent extremism until they establish trusting relationships with the communities they serve.

This is especially true with respect to Muslim American communities, which have experienced significant trauma since 9/11 and have deep concerns about how they are treated by the government. Police outreach and engagement efforts are viewed with some suspicion by Muslim Americans for a number of reasons.

First, Muslim Americans perceive they are being unfairly assigned a collective responsibility to attempt to curb violent extremism inspired by al Qaeda, ISIS, and other likeminded groups, but other communities are not being asked to address anti-government, racist, and other forms of extremism. Our research confirmed that while many policing agencies have robust efforts to conduct outreach with Muslim Americans, they do not have organized, overt efforts to reach out to non-Muslim communities that may be targeted for recruitment by anti-government, racist, or other extremist movements.

Second, some Muslim Americans believe that policing outreach and engagement initiatives may be linked with efforts to conduct surveillance on Muslim American individuals and organizations.

Third, even though most Muslim Americans have favorable impressions of local law enforcement, they see outreach and engagement efforts as part of a federal counter-terrorism program. Their unpleasant experiences with federal agencies, especially with respect to airport security and immigration control, taint their support for partnerships with policing agencies.

We also found that willingness to develop partnerships with the police depends on how effectively the police address other, non-terrorism related, public safety concerns of the community. Some Muslim American communities believe that their public safety concerns are not being fully addressed by the police and therefore are not interested in engaging on other issues.

Finally, developing effective community outreach and engagement programs is also difficult for the police because the programs absorb significant resources and may detract from other police priorities. Community policing programs require staffing, specialized training, and interpreters or intensive language classes for officers – all at a time when many police departments around the country are experiencing budgetary stress. Furthermore, we found that preventing violent extremism, while a pressing national issue, is not a top priority for local police that must address violent crime, drugs, gangs, and a host of other public safety concerns.

The Promise

Despite these and other obstacles, many policing agencies have made progress in establishing strong, trusting relationships with their Muslim American communities that the police believe have advanced public safety. Widespread adoption of these “promising practices” would provide a firm foundation for police relations with Muslim American communities as well as other communities that have been targeted for recruitment by violent extremists. These relationships can be a platform for honoring and respecting the human rights of Muslim American citizens while at the same time advancing the community and national interest of preventing terrorism.

These promising practices include deep leadership commitment to community engagement, broad based engagement efforts that span multiple communities, ensuring that police forces are trained in outreach techniques and cultural competency, hiring a diverse police force, using outreach to address the core needs of the community, and finding ways to divert individuals away from the criminal justice system when possible by providing them the resources and assistance they need.

In light of these findings, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations for Local Policing Agencies

- **Establish outreach and engagement units within departments to the greatest extent budgets can support.**
- **Do not use the phrase “Countering Violent Extremism” or “CVE” to describe the activities of these units. We suggest COMPLETE Public Safety (COMMunity Partnerships with Law Enforcement To Enhance Public Safety) instead.**
- **Prioritize addressing public safety and other concerns of the community.** Doing so will help build trust and enable police and communities to address more sensitive issues – such as building resiliency to violent extremism – in the future.
- **Conduct outreach and engagement with all communities and sub-communities in a jurisdiction.** Do not focus outreach and engagement activities exclusively on Muslim American communities. Apply outreach and engagement strategies to all forms of violent extremism that impact your community – not only extremism inspired by al Qaeda, ISIS and like-minded groups. Develop methods for engaging with community members who may be targeted for recruitment by anti-government, racist, or sovereign citizen violent extremist groups.

- **Separate outreach and engagement units from intelligence collection and criminal investigatory units.** Departments should develop clear policies regarding when and how information provided to outreach officers should be transmitted to intelligence or criminal investigatory units. These policies should be transparent and shared with the community. Outreach officers should not be involved in any criminal investigations arising from information they obtain.
- **Recruit and hire a workforce that reflects the racial, ethnic, and religious composition of a community.** These hiring practices should extend to Muslim Americans, especially if the department has an outreach and engagement unit that interacts with the Muslim American community.
- **Mandate that officers receive cultural awareness training with respect to all major ethnic and religious communities within a jurisdiction.** Use community members to provide this training. Ensure that officers are not exposed to anti-Islamic training materials or bigoted presenters that market themselves as “counterterrorism experts.” Vet materials or programs with knowledgeable authorities and community members.
- **Provide basic language training to outreach officers that interact with immigrant communities.**
- **Work with communities to determine the best way to educate officers and communities about the threat of violent extremism and identify behaviors that should be brought to the attention of the police.** Ensure that officers are taught that behavior such as wearing religious symbols or attire is not an indicator of extremism. Consider joint training exercises with police and community members to promote discussion about the types of activities or behaviors that should be brought to the attention of the police.
- **Conduct a wide variety of outreach and engagement activities with community leaders and community members to familiarize them with the police, show them that police are there to serve the community, and build trust.** Work hard to develop relationships deeply into communities. Do not limit outreach and engagement activities to only organizations and individuals that welcome contact with law enforcement. Do not focus solely on male community members – establish outreach initiatives with women. Develop creative ways to engage with young people as well.
- **Educate community members about police policies and practices, including commitments to protect individual civil rights and civil liberties, as a means of demystifying police work and undermining sources of mistrust.**
- **Integrate local government agencies into community outreach and engagement programs.** Encourage schools, public health officials, mental health officials, and other social services agencies to participate.
- **Facilitate interactions between communities and federal government agencies.** Such interactions can help to address community concerns with federal issues such as immigration, discrimination, and surveillance policy.
- **Work with communities to develop non-criminal intervention programs for individuals attracted to violent extremism.** Community members should participate in creation and delivery of such programs. They should also be involved in developing guidance for determining when referrals to such programs are appropriate.

Recommendations for Muslim American Communities:

- **Engage with police departments to address public safety and other core concerns of the community.** Explain to police the terms on which communities, organizations, or individuals are willing to engage. Be active citizens; do not categorically reject all offers of engagement on an assumption that they are discriminatory or will be used to conduct surveillance.

- Explain community concerns about equal treatment, unfair profiling and stereotyping, surveillance, and any other issues pertaining to police conduct or policies. Work with policing agencies to address these issues. Give them an opportunity to demonstrate that the police will protect and provide services to all community members on a non-discriminatory basis.
- Work with the police to develop sensible, non-discriminatory ways to inform community members about behaviors that indicate potential criminal conduct that should be reported to policing agencies.

Recommendations for the Federal Government:

- Provide long-term funding directly to police departments to support outreach and engagement personnel.
- Ensure that all federal research and training programs on practices and techniques for law enforcement engagement with communities address all forms of violent extremism, including anti-government, racist, sovereign citizen, and environmental violent extremism.
- Fund technical assistance and training to assist policing agencies in conducting outreach and engagement with all communities whose members may be at risk of recruitment to violent extremism in the United States.
- Stop using the phrase “Countering Violent Extremism” or “CVE” to describe community outreach and engagement activities by the police and other government agencies. We suggest use of the phrase COMPLETE Public Safety (COMmunity Partnerships with Law Enforcement To Enhance Public Safety) instead.
- Recognize that many of the factors breeding distrust between communities and local law enforcement arise from activities of the federal government. Redouble efforts to prevent discriminatory treatment, profiling, and harassment of law-abiding citizens at airports and immigration checkpoints. Require all FBI field offices to engage with community groups to explain their policies regarding surveillance, use of informants, and preventing entrapment.

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