

Grant Amount: \$47,497.

Targets: Estimated 2,000 Arlington residents, with a focus on Muslims.

Key Facts: In response to the city's growing Muslim population, Arlington police established Project Connect, which provides crime prevention training in mosques, Muslim community groups, and several unidentified schools and aims to build relations through traditional community outreach activities such as "meet and greets." A former FBI agent, Gamal Abdel Hafiz, has been hired to liaise with Muslim communities and assist in developing CVE training curricula. The grant proposal does not specify whether crime prevention training and the CVE materials to be developed by Hafiz will aim to encourage the reporting of individuals as potential violent extremists. The proposal notes, however, that the program's "activities may not be accepted in all Muslim community groups" and could encounter "some pushback from individuals and groups in the community." This may be a reference to community opposition to CVE programs and could suggest that crime prevention training will be focused on identifying individuals as potential violent extremists.

The grant proposal states that Project Connect activities "are not intended for the purpose of restricting a resident's civil rights, civil liberties, or privacy," but does not evaluate whether they have the potential to do so.

People attending programs will receive an evaluation form which will measure the utility of the format and the topics covered. Six-monthly program "progress reports" will measure markers such as overall program attendance at events and "the number of Muslim enrollees in [Arlington Police Department] citizens' programs."

Partners: Arlington Clergy & Police Partnership.

Pass-through Organization: None identified.

Consultants: Gamal Abdel Hafiz (\$13,125).

Supporters: None identified.

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Houston, TX (Houston Mayor's Office)

Name of Program: Countering Violent Extremism Training and Engagement Initiative.

Detailed Program Information: [Available here \[PDF\]](#).

Type of Program: Intervention; Social Service.

Type of Organization: Public Safety.

Grant Amount: \$500,000.

Targets: 810,000 youth of the Greater Houston region and nearly 1.5 million family households, with a focus on Muslim communities.

Key Facts: The grant proposal stresses the need to reduce the risk of terrorism in the city as Houston rises to prominence as a nationwide leader in refugee resettlement and cultural and religious diversity. To do so, the office will establish and coordinate a multi-disciplinary CVE “steering committee,” made up of governmental, inter-faith, non-profit, law enforcement, and academic partners. In conjunction with the FBI and Houston’s fusion center, this committee will develop workshops for Muslim parents and youth that aim to explain “terrorism ideologies” and the “root causes of extremism,” as well as risk factors and available social and community resources. An addendum to the application describes a number of activities supposedly linked to people at-risk for extremist ideology. Unidentified consultants with “CVE expertise” will conduct initial trainings, while community leaders will be identified and trained to serve as future facilitators (“train-the-trainer” program).

Partners from the Anti-Defamation League will assist the CVE steering committee with “ensuring civil rights and civil liberties are protected,” but the proposal provides no specifics.

The success of the initiative will be evaluated based on activities conducted (e.g., number of youth and parent workshops held, the number of trainers vetted, trained, and certified). There will also be workshop evaluation responses and follow-up surveys, but it is not known what they will measure.

Partners: Rice University, University of Houston, Islamic Society of Greater Houston, United Way, Federal Bureau of Investigations, Houston Regional Intelligence Service Center (Fusion Center), Anti-Defamation League, Houston Regional CVE Steering Committee.

Pass-through Organizations: None identified.

Consultants: Unnamed consultants for curriculum development (\$152,000), the train-the trainer initiative (\$50,000), project management support (\$160,750), communications and media (\$50,000).

Supporters: None identified.

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Houston, TX (Crisis Intervention of Houston)

Name of Program: Community Collaborative to Counter Violent Extremism in Houston, TX.

Detailed Program Information: [Available here \[PDF\].](#)

Type of Program: CVE Online; Intervention.

Type of Organization: Non-Profit.

Grant Amount: \$500,000.

Targets: Primarily young Muslims in the city of Houston, as well as Latinos and South Asians.

Key Facts: Two groups, Crisis Intervention and Alliance for Compassion and Tolerance, have created a CVE program to address the risk of violent extremist recruitment in Houston. The groups emphasize that the city's diversity (e.g. "most diverse in the nation," "largest number of refugees," "over 100 mosques and a dozen Islamic schools") makes it a model for pioneering intervention activities across the country. The program will operate an anonymous crisis hotline for "individuals struggling with thoughts of violent extremism" and run anti-bullying workshops for "Arab, Latino, and South Asian children" who are "called 'terrorist' by classmates because of their faith or skin color." Additionally, it will train parents and community leaders from over 100 mosques and a dozen Islamic schools on unspecified "warning signs to watch for with their children for online extremism," and train community/youth leaders to facilitate discussions addressing youth concerns, such as "questions on religious texts, sociopolitical issues, and terrorism." It is not clear what will happen to information gleaned from the hotline, but the proposal does mention providing callers who exhibit "warning signs" with information about unspecified community resources. An addendum to the application describes a number of activities supposedly linked to people at-risk of extremist ideology.

The proposal states that "protecting privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties is of utmost importance" to the program but does not include specific information on how this will be accomplished.

Crisis Intervention has the most extensive metrics among all CVE grantees. It plans to conduct evaluations for the anti-bullying workshop (participant surveys and biannual assessments), the hotline (changes to call data), the online safety workshop for parents (participant surveys), and discussions addressing youth concerns (participant surveys). For the hotline, the group plans to assess, using crisis management metrics, whether the counseling provided prevented terrorist attacks as well as.

Partners: Alliance for Compassion and Tolerance, Shifa Clinic, Organization of Pakistani Entrepreneurs, River Oaks Islamic Center, EMERGE USA Houston, Salaam Reentry Program, WISE, Muslim Professional Association, Amaanah Refugee Services, University of Houston, Center for Borders, Trade and Immigration Research, Rice University, United Way, Anti-Defamation League, World Affairs Council of Houston, Houston Police Department, Harris County Sheriff's Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation, A.T. Still University, Indus Arts Council, Islamic Arts Society & Muslim Artists of Houston, Intersections International, Islamic Society of Greater Houston.

Pass-through Organizations: Alliance for Compassion and Tolerance (\$100,000).

Consultants: Unnamed consultant for marketing/outreach and training (\$156,000).

Supporters: None identified.

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Seattle, WA (Seattle Police Department)

Name of Program: Countering Violent Extremism Program.

Detailed Program Information: [Available here \[PDF\]](#).

Type of Program: Community Outreach; Social Service.

Type of Organization: Police Department.

Grant Amount: \$409,390.

Targets: Immigrants and refugees, “disengaged youth” aged 5-18, and “disenfranchised Seattleites” (such as African American, Native American, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and homeless populations).

Key Facts: The program targets groups it considers to be “at risk” for violent extremism and aims to address the threat by improving community cohesion and trust in law enforcement. The Seattle police have an existing [program](#) focused on combining community engagement, crime data, and police services in “micro” communities, which they are expanding. Police will participate in workshops with refugees and immigrants to improve officers’ understanding of minority cultures and community members’ understanding of police procedures and laws. Officers will coach and mentor youth from communities of color. They will also help conduct youth workshops in schools, which may result in referring students to mental health services. Finally, officers will facilitate integration sessions to address issues raised by “disenfranchised Seattleites.”

The grant proposal does mention potential impacts to civil rights, but only in reference to a 2014 Department of Justice funded CVE guide.

Seattle University researchers will evaluate the program through community surveys that measure “perceptions of police, neighborhood features, and crime as related to public safety,” and the “demand and success of additional community activities and services” resulting from this grant.

Partners: Seattle University, Seattle Police Department Demographic Advisory Councils, Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, King County Rehabilitation Center, Seattle Public Interagency Schools, and unnamed city, faith, and community-based organizations.

Pass-through Organizations: Seattle University (\$60,000), Interpretation Institute (\$12,400).

Consultants: Unnamed Public Outreach and Engagement Liaisons (\$18,000), facilitator for the Immigrant Family Institute (\$10,000), and instructor to train Immigrant Family Institute and Seattle Police Department about trauma care (\$3,000).

Supporters: None identified.

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EXPLAINER

Why Countering Violent Extremism Programs Are Bad Policy

In the aftermath of deadly white supremacist attacks, a destructive counterterrorism program is being rehabilitated.

PUBLISHED: September 9, 2019

**Protect Liberty &
Security**Government Targeting
of Minority
Communities

After a white supremacist gunman walked into a crowded Walmart and killed 22 people in early August, Democratic **presidential candidates** and members of Congress have made addressing white nationalist terrorism a priority for federal law enforcement. This is a necessary and welcome development considering this threat **hasn't been taken seriously enough** by federal, state, or local law enforcement across the nation. Unfortunately, many of the policy and legislative proposals would strengthen directly and indirectly a counterterrorism framework known as countering violent extremism (CVE).

While federal law enforcement agencies involved in CVE paint the program as a community outreach initiative dedicated to stopping people from becoming violent extremists, the reality is that these programs, which are

based on junk science, have proven to be ineffective, discriminatory, and divisive. Here's what you need to know about the dangers of CVE programs and why the framework should be abandoned rather than rehabilitated.

What is the countering violent extremism program?

CVE is a counterterrorism strategy that recruits community leaders, social workers, teachers, and public health providers ostensibly to assist the government in identifying individuals that may be "at risk" of becoming violent extremists. But the idea that there are predictive risk indicators has been discredited by decades of scholarly research. They have been targeted almost exclusively at Muslims and employ spurious criteria, such as religiosity and political activism and vague feelings of alienation, as proxies for violent tendencies.

CVE has been around for several years, involving a variety of programs led by federal prosecutors, the FBI, and Department of Homeland Security. While these agencies often present the strategy as a "soft" approach to counterterrorism, internal agency documents **obtained** by the Brennan Center and others reveal that they often mask efforts to gather intelligence, identify individuals who are not suspected of wrongdoing for surveillance, recruit informants, and co-opt community leaders to promote government messaging. These goals are hidden behind the language of community outreach.

Though CVE programs have been in place for many years, no evidence demonstrates that they are effective in reducing terrorist violence or even the spread of "extreme" ideas. And contrary to the stated goals of these programs to strengthen community resilience, they have proven to be discriminatory in practice and stigmatizing, divisive, and destructive to the communities they target.

CVE programs were built on top of a disproven theory

CVE programs are designed around the erroneous idea that there is a discernible process of radicalization that results in terrorist violence. The key assumption of radicalization theory is that individuals who adopt "extremist" ideologies start down a conveyor belt that leads inexorably toward becoming a terrorist.

While this proposition may have some intuitive appeal, decades of empirical research disproves it. Many people hold views that can be described as "extreme" and never support or commit an act of violence based on those beliefs. And many who commit terrorist violence have little or no attachments to an extreme ideology.

As counterterrorism scholar and former CIA officer Marc Sageman **stated**, "Despite decades of research, . . . we still do not know what leads people to engage in political violence." Moreover, ideas that once seemed extreme, such as women's suffrage and civil rights for all, were necessary drivers of social progress. Suppressing violence is a laudable government goal. Suppressing ideas that don't meet government approval is not.

CVE programs based on this flawed radicalization theory **routinely flag** innocent behavior, such as mistrust of law enforcement and feelings of alienation, as indicators of "pre-terrorism." In a May 2014 document, "**Countering Violent Extremism: A Guide for Practitioners and Analysts**," the National Counterterrorism Center **developed** a questionnaire for police, social workers, and teachers to rank members of the communities they serve on a scale of one to five in categories like "Connection to Group Identity (Race, Nationality, Religion, Ethnicity)" and "Expressions of Hopelessness, Futility."

Vague indicators like these are meaningless predictors of terrorist violence and turn normal human experiences into suspicious behaviors that will potentially brand innocent individuals as possible terrorists. Not surprisingly, there is no evidence that CVE programs reduce terrorism. In April 2017, the Government Accountability Office published a critical report evaluating federal CVE efforts.

“The federal government does not have a cohesive strategy or process for assessing the overall CVE effort,” the report **warned**, stating that its investigators could not “determine if the United States is better off today than it was in 2011 as a result of these tasks.”

CVE programs target Muslims despite the persistent threat of far-right domestic terrorism

Government public-facing descriptions of CVE are almost always ideologically and religiously neutral, but the overwhelming focus has always been on American Muslim communities. This is more than problematic as CVE programming reinforces false Islamophobic notions that Muslim Americans pose a grave threat of terrorism. Since 9/11, multiple studies **show** that far-right terrorists commit more attacks and kill as many people as any other terrorist movements.

Nevertheless, during the Obama administration, the federal government awarded 31 CVE grants totaling \$10 million, with only one going to a group that even partially focused on far-right violence. More than half of that \$400,000 grant was to be directed toward **identifying** and deradicalizing so-called “jihadist” extremists. The incoming Trump administration canceled that grant along with other Obama-era grants. Trump administration officials also made the program’s prejudice overt when a member of the president’s transition team in 2016 **floated the idea** of renaming the program, “Countering Radical Islam” or “Countering Violent Jihad.”

Furthermore, 85 percent of CVE grants administered during the Trump era explicitly targeted minority groups, including Muslims, LGBTQ Americans, Black Lives Matter activists, immigrants, and refugees, according to **Brennan Center analysis** of the grants. More than half of CVE programs now focus on schools and students, in some cases as young as 5 years old.

CVE programs are Trojan horses

CVE programs are surveillance and intelligence programs masquerading as community outreach programs. Although the Department of Homeland Security currently reports that “CVE efforts do not include gathering intelligence or performing investigations for the purpose of criminal prosecution,” internal government documents say otherwise.

According to a document **unearthed** by the Brennan Center, the FBI’s own CVE office describes its approach as designed to “strengthen our investigative, intelligence gathering, and collaborative abilities to be proactive in countering violent extremism.”

Surveillance and intelligence gathering even extends to young children and teenagers in schools. In early 2016, the FBI launched a CVE **program** targeting schoolchildren. It included an interactive website, “**Don’t Be a Puppet**,” to teach children about violent extremism, with the goal of turning teachers and students into government spies, monitoring one another for tell-tale expressions of unorthodox ideas.

In August 2016, the American Federation of Teachers formally objected to the FBI's "Don't Be a Puppet" CVE program. The nation's second largest teacher's union **described** the program as "ideological profiling and surveillance," particularly of Middle Eastern and Muslim students, that will have a "chilling effect on our schools and immigrant communities, jeopardizing children's sense of safety and well-being and threatening the security and sense of trust of entire communities."

In community centers, places of worship, and schools, for example, CVE provides an excuse and a tool to surveil Americans whose only crime is belonging to a group that faces discrimination. This is a counterproductive approach to counterterrorism that stigmatizes and alienates targeted communities and sows distrust of law enforcement.

CVE programs jeopardize fundamental rights

It's understandable that Democratic presidential candidates and members of Congress would want to do something to address white nationalist terrorism, but CVE is neither effective nor can it be squared with fundamental individual rights.

The counterterrorism framework always risks associating "extremist" ideas, a subjective and nebulous concept, with violence, thereby stigmatizing and delegitimizing innocent people in ways that touch on First-Amendment protected activity. For instance, in 2017, journalists **revealed** that the bureau had created a category of possible terrorists labeled "Black Identity Extremist" for a movement that didn't exist and connected it to the First Amendment-protected activity of Black protesters against police violence.

American Muslims, however, have been the disproportionate victims of law enforcement suspicion and surveillance based on vague and meaningless terrorism indicators that implicate foundational American freedoms. In 2014, the Justice Department gave \$500,000 to a nonprofit organization in Montgomery County, Maryland. The program's mission was to identify American Muslims vulnerable to becoming terrorists. Its "potential risk factors" included "political grievances" and "ideology, beliefs and values," all expressions and beliefs protected by the First Amendment. And in Boston, the Massachusetts Office of Public Safety and Security, a 2016 CVE grantee, **listed** criticism of U.S. foreign policy as a terrorism indicator.

This shouldn't be surprising considering the federal government routinely fails to abide by its own rule that that rights protections must be baked into the grants they approve. In the Brennan Center's **analysis** of 26 Trump-era CVE grants, 14 grantees never mention how their program will address privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties concerns. Of the 12 that do, only six indicate the safeguards they would put in place to respect fundamental rights. Not one of the six, however, specify the safeguards they would institute to protect individuals from rights violations.

CVE programs fail because they focus on suppressing ideas, rather than reducing violence. With more than half of the violent crimes committed in the United States going unsolved each year, law enforcement resources should not be wasted on CVE programs that have proven to be ineffective and discriminatory in practice.

(Image: Sandy Huffaker/Getty)

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