



NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER

Third-Party Reporting and Intervention Critical

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Summary

Third parties usually witness activities or behaviors by homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) that could trigger early intervention by community members or law enforcement, yet less than half of these witnesses report their observations, according a review of 57 case studies of HVEs identified between 2009 and 2012. Encouraging increased reporting and intercession by third parties who observe behavior indicative of radicalization or mobilization to violence could improve the success of efforts to curb extremist acts in the US.

- Authority figures typically learn about individuals' extremist leanings while interacting with them in mosques, classrooms, or places of employment, while strangers primarily interact with HVEs in the final planning stages of an attack, such as when they try to acquire precursor materials from commercial businesses, according to the case studies.
- Bystanders fail to report concerning behavior for a variety of reasons, including to avoid appearing alarmist, slandering a potentially innocent person, or causing authorities to overreact. Many probably do not recognize the importance of their observations.

Observations, Willingness To Report Depend on Relationship to HVE

Third parties, or bystanders, have observed activities or behaviors indicative of radicalization or violent intent in more than 80 percent of cases involving HVEs, yet more than half of the witnesses discounted or downplayed their observations, according to a review of case study data. The case studies indicate that family members and peers—who are best positioned to witness unusual behaviors—are the most resistant to sharing their concerns with authorities, suggesting that the most common signs of behavior leading to extremist violence often are unreported.

These findings are based on empirical and statistical analysis of data from 57 cases of Islamic violent extremists in the US between 2009 and 2012. The study is part of an ongoing joint effort to examine thought processes and identifiable behaviors that precede HVEs' decisions to support or carry out acts of violence.

Most Observations Relate to Radicalization

The majority of bystander observations relate to radicalization, such as awareness that an individual is sympathetic to violent ideology or is emotionally unstable,

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probably in part because HVEs increase their operational security in the months leading up to a planned attack, judging from the case studies. Fewer than 20 percent of observations from the case studies related to plotting or recruitment, and most of those activities were focused abroad. This foreign focus may cause some bystanders to downplay the threat.

- Personality changes—such as becoming overzealous, conspiratorial, and confrontational—are noticed by those most familiar with the person of concern. The parents of Zachary Adam Chesser—imprisoned for providing support to al-Shabaab—said he created an increasingly hostile home environment by demanding strict rules to enforce Islamic traditions.
- Two-thirds of the case study observations not directly related to plotting had to do with an individual's interest in traveling to a conflict zone or in supporting other extremists' activities.
- Peers are the most likely to learn about ongoing plotting, judging from the case studies, often because HVEs want to boast, seek approval, or recruit them. Before leaving the US in 2008 to join the Taliban, Najibullah Zazi and two associates tried to recruit a friend to travel with them, according to open-source reporting.

Opportunities To Increase Reporting, Intervention

Bystanders tend to discount signs of radicalization if they do not witness other indicators of an individual's mobilization to violence, particularly because the radicalization process is unpredictable and often lengthy. Tailoring existing community engagement and training programs to help bystanders understand the radicalization

process and detect warning signs could increase the likelihood that they report their concerns. Providing multiple channels to share concerns with trusted interlocutors—such as religious leaders or a community ombudsman—also could increase reporting rates, particularly among family members and peers who are the most hesitant to involve law enforcement.

- Education programs geared toward family members could focus on personality changes, social distancing, and increased interest in travel abroad. In 2009 a father who had read about al-Shabaab's recruitment of Somali youths in the US gave his son's passport to FBI upon learning that he intended to travel to Yemen, according to open-source reporting.
- A public awareness campaign using statements from family members and peers of HVEs could highlight the consequences and regret of not doing enough to counter an individual's radicalization. Women interviewed in the documentary *Your Mother*, for example, talk about their children's involvement in violent extremism and how their children's choices destroyed their families. The women encourage others to discuss terrorism and radicalization and emphasize the role mothers play in prevention.
- Training would benefit authority figures because they often have insight into an individual's level of frustration about perceived grievances and because they can guide their communities on reportable information. In the case studies, several disrupted HVEs clashed with religious leaders over ideological differences and were either shunned or dismissed. Few tried to rechannel the HVEs' behavior because the leaders did not view the individuals as potentially violent.

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