The Use of Community Policing for the Prevention of Violent Extremism

Executive Summary

It is critical that the federal government encourage local governments to focus resources on community policing efforts that address the dynamics of radicalization to violence. By establishing partnerships with local community members, law enforcement personnel can engage in proactive problem solving that can make tangible contributions to the broader strategic efforts of preventing terrorism and countering violent extremism. However, before the community policing model can be used on a national scale to combat violent extremism, a protracted effort to shift in the culture of law enforcement in the United States must be initiated.

The Issue of Violent Extremism

Violent extremism as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2018) involves encouraging, condoning, or justifying the commission of a violent act in support of political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals. Individuals prone to violent extremism typically have an underlying need for personal significance and belief that violence is morally acceptable in pursuit of a cause that fulfills the need for attention and meaning in their life (Kruglanski, Jasko & Webber, 2018). This aspect of their psychological makeup results in these individuals being more susceptible violent extremism given that a wide range of contributing issues such as socioeconomic status, education level, personal grievances, alienation, victimization, as well as anger directed at perceived injustices or persecution are typically present in their lives (Gelfand, Bélanger & Sheveland, 2014). Further, the ease that these individuals can communicate using social media platforms and the manner that the internet provides ready access to propaganda and promotors of violent extremism only serves to underscore the potential danger, lethality, and effectiveness of an attack by a lone gunman or group of like-minded individuals.

Violent Extremism within the United States

Following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the United States was predominantly focused on coercive measures to combat the terrorist threat that involved the use of American military forces, as well as increased law enforcement powers and broader use of intelligence gathering capabilities. Despite the on-going debate regarding the effectiveness of the United States war on terror, research indicates that after discounting acts of terrorism in countries engaged in ongoing conflicts, the post 9/11 era is less prone to terrorist acts than the preceding years (Enders & Sandler, 2005; Smith & Zeigler, 2017). Correspondingly, the American emphasis on combatting terrorism abroad began a decided shift during the mid-2000s following several high-profile instances of homegrown extremist violence in Western countries.

Specific to the United States, over the course of the last decade violent extremism has evolved into a more complex and multifaceted threat to achieve political, ideological, religious, or social goals. Since September 11, 2001, radical Islamist and far-right extremists have committed 85 attacks within the United States resulting in the death of 225 individuals (Extremist Crime Database, 2018). Historically, terrorist acts on American soil have involved a broad range of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, anti-Semitic hate groups, anti-government groups including those opposed to federal ownership of public lands, Neo-Nazis as well as other racial supremacist and radical religious extremist groups. However, within recent years attacks have become more prevalent by individuals who have a limited or no connection to a specific right-wing group or ideological movement and are inspired by a broad belief system, often with only a narrow focus on a given issue (START, 2017). As such, efforts to prevent homegrown terrorism within the United States have evolved during the past decade to incorporate more non-coercive methods of countering violent extremism.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

For many Americans, the relative absence of empirical knowledge concerning the causes of radicalization has resulted in a conceptual confusion that rationalizes extremist violence in the same manner as terrorism (Pisou & Ahmed, 2016; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2018). As such, early efforts to suppress terrorist acts within the United States involved the use of counterterrorism tactics by military and local law enforcement personnel. Programs to counter violent extremism were focused on strategies designed to suppress violence, but more often did little more than further social disharmony by alienating segments of a population (Baker-Beall, Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2014). As scholarly research regarding the underlying aspects of radicalization and violent extremism grew, the modern-day concept for countering violent extremism evolved to encompass a broad range of soft strategies emphasizing elements of social and cultural change which previously had various designations such as social harmony, social cohesion, and community resilience (Pickering, McCulloch & Wright-Neville, 2008).

With efforts to counter violent extremism now considered in the context of a social issue, prevention strategies have moved beyond counterterrorism tactics to focus on integration, rehabilitation, and re-engagement of individuals prone to radicalization. Given this new perspective for countering violent extremism, programs were designed by many communities to proactively engage with violent extremist in the belief that establishing partnerships with the police and other public authorities would contribute to a broader understanding of divisive issues and could encourage those individuals to adopt a more moderate and nonviolent view. However, while these early engagement programs were focused on anticipating risks, the efforts were not embedded in a comprehensive, coherent and strategy to combat all conditions that were conducive to terrorism.

Government Initiatives

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, counterterrorism efforts have been the dominant theme in the national security policy of the United States. However, within the past decade, there has been a gradual shift in strategic initiatives to counter violent extremism by focusing on preventing all types of potential terrorist acts in the United States. In this light, during December 2011 the Obama administration issued a *Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* to strengthen cooperation with local law enforcement and assist community leaders in understanding the threat of violent extremism (White House, 2011). Accordingly, considering that the majority of efforts to counter violent extremism occurred at the local government level, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began to establish terrorism prevention partnerships at the local law enforcement level in the belief that police agencies were better suited to protect and serve local communities, especially those that are at risk for radicalization. The subsequent recognition by many local governments that adopting a community policing model was a necessary to reform to better protect and serve populations at risk for radicalization resulted in more progressive local law enforcement agencies creating or expanded existing community policing efforts. Conceptually, the community policing efforts would be used to educate citizens about violent extremism, encourage reporting of suspicious activities as well as attempts to radicalize individuals or sow distrust within communities. In practice, it was recognized that better coordination was needed to guide federal efforts to enhance community engagement and law enforcement expertise in the prevention of violent extremism. As such, in October 2016 the Obama administration updated its initial SIP to address the knowledge gained through community policing experiences over the previous five years (White House, 2016).

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Community Policing as a Terrorism Prevention Tool

The United States Department of Justice (2018) has defined community policing as a focus on crime and social disorder that incorporates aspects of traditional law enforcement crime prevention efforts, community engagement, and partnerships. Although definitions often vary between academic institutions and law enforcement agencies, there is a general agreement that community policing represents a fundamental shift from traditional police crime-fighting and law enforcement functions. Nevertheless, despite critics who perceive community partnerships as an unwarranted expansion of police powers, effectively implemented community policing strategies can serve to address a wide range of public safety threats, including violent extremism (Schanzer, Kurzman, Toliver & Miller, 2016).

The driving philosophy of community policing programs is rooted in the ideology that criminal activity can be reduced through a trusting relationship between the police and citizens to address threats that create a climate of fear and social disorder. As such, integrating efforts to prevent violent extremism into existing community oriented policing activities represents a natural fit for implementing aspects of the national security strategy for combating terrorism within local communities. Even more critical is the implementation of community policing efforts in Muslim communities where many individuals have grave concerns about how they are treated by the government since 9/11, as well communities that are comprised of immigrants from countries where the police were feared and citizens have learned to not become involved in the activities of others. In as much as community policing can humanize law enforcement officers for citizens in these communities and help shift prejudices against the police, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies not reduce or discontinue community policing efforts which are still considered by many to be a frill or passing fad (Docobo, 2005).

The Status of Community Policing Efforts

The community policing model provides the conceptual framework for the implementation of homeland security efforts to establish prevention strategies by local law enforcement agencies that result in early warnings about terrorist activities, violent extremists, and radicalization efforts (Murray, 2005). However, decades-long experience at the local level indicates that achieving measurable results through the effective implementation of community policing strategies requires significant time and support for the requisite culture changes to permeate both law enforcement agencies and the local community (Berkeley School of Law, 2013). Further, for the already difficult task of establishing a community policing mindset within a given law enforcement agency to become a reality in practice rather than just an endorsed principal, an increase or reallocation of staffing is required as well as both agency-wide training and specialized training for officers directly involved in outreach and engagement activities.

Unfortunately, despite recognition that preventing violent extremism is imperative to homeland security efforts, community policing programs are not always a top priority of local law enforcement agencies that must also address issues such as violent crime, drug use, and gang activities at a time when local governments across the nation are struggling balance priorities amid the reality of budgetary constraints (Gumbel, 2015). As such, despite notable successes of community policing efforts to combat criminal activities, violent extremism, and terrorist acts, a 2016 study identified that less than half of law enforcement agencies in the United States had established community policing programs (Schanzer, Kurzman, Toliver, & Miller, 2016). Further, instances have been identified where local law enforcement agencies have adopted community policing as more of a philosophical objective to obtain broadly scoped federal government grant funding to use for other initiatives (Berkeley School of Law, 2013).

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The Need for Consistent and Long-Term Federal Guidance

Government and law enforcement officials have long recognized the critical importance of effective partnerships to address public safety concerns in the United States. However, it is inherently difficult to implement presidential policy declarations for using existing partnerships to incorporate the use of community policing as a method of combating violent extremism without recognizing the that law enforcement as a whole in the United States is tainted by charges of civil rights violations, militarization, and a culture of mass incarceration. Further, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has recognized that federal implementation efforts to counter violent extremism have been adversely impacted by the absence of central oversight and an lack of specific goals or tangible measures of success (Selim, 2016). The significance of this DHS finding was underscored in a report by the Government Accountability Office (2017) identifying that as of December 2016 less than half of the 44 objectives outlined in the 2011 White House Strategic Implementation Plan that were focused on addressing domestic national security issues such as violent extremism had been implemented by the federal government.

For the community policing model to be effectively used throughout the United States in addressing the dynamics of violent extremism, a protracted effort to shift the culture of American law enforcement must first be initiated at the federal government level. Given this consideration, President Obama launched a Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) which ultimately identified police culture as a principal underlying cause for the strained relations existing between the police and many local communities. However, the practical effects of the presidential efforts have been limited as only a small fraction of the nation's 18,000 police agencies in the United States have taken significant steps to implement task force recommendations (Task Force Progress Report, 2016).

Conclusion

Conceptually, incorporating the use of community policing programs by local law enforcement agencies into the homeland security strategy provides an essential contribution to the federal effort for combating violent extremism in the United States. From a practical perspective, it incorporates a community-centered approach in which trust between law enforcement and citizens is a crucial tenant in police efforts to combat criminal activity as well as violent extremism and radicalization activities. Unfortunately, in a majority of communities across the United States, law enforcement officers are perceived as being more akin to soldiers involved in a paramilitary conflict rather than trusted partners working with community members to make their neighborhoods stronger and safer. More significantly, while many local law enforcement agencies have worked to implement initiatives designed to educate officers on the emergent threat of violent extremism, as a whole, the efforts have not been sufficient in altering the more fundamental issue of an organizational culture that moves the policing approach from a warrior model to a guardian model as proposed by President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. This is not to say that law enforcement must sacrifice successes in traditional crime-fighting activities. Rather, the unique cultural norms of the law enforcement occupation that reinforces an us versus them mentality where officers remain distant to the community must be changed to one where officers at all levels of an agency are actively engaged with citizens within the community if the homeland security strategy of using community policing efforts to combat the emergent threat of violent extremism is to be successful at the national level. This can only be achieved through a comprehensive and long-term plan of action lead by the federal government that is subsequently implemented by inspired local law enforcement leadership to fundamentally alter the culture and perceptions of policing in the United States.

Policy Recommendations

While it is easy to blame the law enforcement community for the current police crisis facing the United States, elected government officials also have a shared degree of blame as well as responsibility for the actions needed to implement critical organizational changes. Accordingly, to improve the culture of law enforcement and address conflicts between the police and the community, the policy recommendations identified below should be considered.

Recommendation 1: At the federal level, more than $3.8 billion in grants are provided to states and cities for law enforcement and criminal justice purposes each year. These federal dollars play a pivotal role in driving state and local law enforcement policies to better focus on 21st-century policing priorities. By modifying these federal grants to promote measurable outcomes that both reduce crime and unnecessary arrests and incarceration the nations law enforcement agencies would have a monetary incentive to change current police practices.

Recommendation 2: For a real change to occur in the culture of law enforcement in the United States, a strategic national level training regime must be developed to provide for a consistent foundation and social values that officers can incorporate into their daily activities. This broad change to the training of new and experienced officers provides a uniform method for addressing emerging police trends and the ideology of violent extremism.

Recommendation 3: Despite the stated intent of law enforcement leaders to reduce tensions and improve relations between the police and racial and ethnic minorities, the actual tactics of community policing remain predominantly focused on white perceptions of the police rather than for Latinos and African Americans. As such, sustained and nationally consistent diversity training for law enforcement officers to better understand racial, ethnic, gender and religious differences are critical to the evolution of community policing policies.

Recommendation 4: Community policing shifts the method that law enforcement operates by allowing officers to identify and address core community problems and issues instead of waiting on public calls for assistance. A significant degree of federal funding assumes that a community policing model is in effect to solve such problems and crime, the fear of crime, social disorder, and neighborhood decay. However, only a limited body of research is available that evaluates purported community policing programs to determine if they adhere to the basic tenets of community policing models. Further, research of community policing programs that have been conducted were focused on case studies of larger urban law enforcement agencies rather than smaller police departments. Accordingly, additional scholarly research is needed to evaluate the efforts of law enforcement agencies nationwide to determine the extent to which agency personnel comprehend and practice community policing methods.

Recommendation 5: The 2015 Task Force on 21st Century Policing provided the genesis for establishing comprehensive state and local partnerships with the federal government in combating emergent threats of violent extremism. In as much as the task force recommendations identified police culture as a principal underlying cause for the strained relations existing between the police and many local communities, sustained leadership at the federal level is required to maintain the momentum and discussion necessary for the implementation of cultural changes by law enforcement agencies as a whole within the United States. More specifically, federal agencies coordinating grants for local community policing programs require adequate funding and support to be effective. As such, the decade-long decline in the budget of the Justice Department's Office of Community Policing Services should be reversed and efforts by the current Trump administration de-prioritize implementation of recommendations by the Task Force on 21st Century Policing should be discontinued.

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