101
COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

By Habiba Farh | March 2024

Introduction

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is a domestic counterextremism strategy to counter radicalization and violent extremism following a rise in ISIS' operations and recruitment across Europe and the United States. Introduced by the Obama Administration, the strategy has been lauded by some academics, politicians, and activists for providing an alternative to arbitrary detention, instead seeking to protect communities and prevent mass violence. However, this counterextremism framework and its programs are based on the faulty logic that ideological, cultural, psychological, and environmental factors determine—and can purportedly be used to predict—a person's likelihood of committing mass violence.

Consequently, the CVE framework disproportionately targets communities harmed by the imperialist, globe-spanning War on Terror by turning expressions of cultural and religious identity, political activism, and mental health struggles into markers of radicalization. Instead of preventing violence by addressing its causes, the CVE approach continues the War on Terror's structural violence by criminalizing the communities it purports to protect.

CVE programs recruit people to collaborate with state security in conducting surveillance on their own communities. CVE links community organizations and

institutions directly to law enforcement through the use of multidisciplinary threat assessment and management teams—composed of law enforcement, community members, educators, religious leaders, and medical professionals—to identify individuals who are perceived to be at risk of committing violence. The Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program (TVTP) also provides funding to community organizations, religious establishments, medical centers, universities, schools—and most notably, law enforcement, which remains the biggest recipient of TVTP funding—to develop discriminatory violence prevention programs.

Since the January 6 Insurrection, government officials, Democratic politicians, academic centers, and nonprofit organizations have redoubled their support for the counterextremism strategy behind CVE, viewing it as an effective way to protect American institutions and society from White supremacists, far-right militias, and mass shooters. In practice, however, CVE measures continue to empower law enforcement agencies to target communities historically impacted by policing and the War on Terror, including Black, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian, and immigrant communities, those struggling with mental health, and the formerly incarcerated. Thus, CVE measures further harm people already at risk of experiencing White supremacist and far-right violence.

This 101 explains how CVE functions in its many forms, how it impacts communities that are disproportionately criminalized and targeted during the ongoing War on Terror, and how CVE impacts the American public more broadly.

Who

These institutions set the social and cultural context for the Countering Violent Extremism framework and advocate for its programs.

The White House

Obama | The Obama administration quietly launched the [Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Initiative in three cities (Greater Boston, Los Angeles, and the Twin cities)](#) as a pilot program, as a soft-power approach "[to prevent homegrown violent extremism](#)."

Trump | In 2017, the Trump Administration divested from the previous administration's general CVE approach and [reportedly planned to rename its existing programs as "Countering Islamic Extremism" or "Countering Radical Islamic Extremism"](#) to label Muslims as the sole target of the administration's counterextremism measures. Two years later, the Trump administration rebranded CVE as [Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP)](#).

Biden | While campaigning, [President Biden promised to end the TVTP program](#). However, in 2022, the [Biden administration announced the launch of the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3)](#), which was functionally a rebrand of CVE and TVTP that [continued and expanded funding to law enforcement](#). This iteration of the program explicitly named White supremacists and anti-government militias as domestic threats after the January 6 insurrection.

Internationally

[Islamophobia](#) is a structural global ideology that underlies CVE measures, which have become the normative method for domestic counterinsurgency in multiple countries around the world. The United Kingdom was the first nation to implement CVE measures through Prevent, [a counterterrorism program that aimed to prevent vulnerable populations—i.e., Muslims—from becoming terrorists](#). The Obama Administration's CVE initiative [built on](#) Prevent's framework to counter growing rates of violent extremism in the United States.

Along with the United Kingdom, [Australia](#), the [Netherlands](#), [Germany](#), [Belgium](#), and other countries all have their own CVE programs. [The United Nations also promotes CVE as an effective counterterror measure](#). Social justice organizations have consistently raised flags that international CVE programs [violate human rights and perpetuate anti-Muslim bigotry in education and healthcare](#).

Research and Academia

Research and academic centers continue to produce problematic research and analysis that support CVE measures based on the faulty premise that a person's background or ideology predisposes them to violent extremism. Some organizations, such as the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE) at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism at Middlebury College receive Department of Homeland Security funding to "establish or enhance capabilities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism."

Centers such as the RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Center for American Process (CAP) may not receive CVE funding (that we're aware of) but base their research and analysis on the faulty premise that Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, immigrants, and people with disabilities or mental health struggles are more prone to radicalize and commit acts of mass terror. Some of these organizations, such as RAND and NCITE, also push "public health" interventions to target growing radicalization and violence, pathologizing violence and perpetuating the Hate Frame in politics and health care.

What

These are common issue areas for Countering Violent Extremism programs.

Surveillance and Hyper-policing

CVE programs are modeled after other counterinsurgency programs that use surveillance as their main method, such as COINTELPRO and Operation Boulder in the United States, and Prevent in the United Kingdom. These programs operate under the assumption that certain communities must be surveilled and disrupted to prevent mass violence, although there is no scientifically backed evidence that certain behavioral, ideological, or cultural factors prove unequivocally that someone is radicalizing or on the path to committing acts of mass violence.

Anti-Muslim Bigotry

CVE programs perpetuate the Islamophobic idea that Muslims, especially those who are religious or politically active, are more prone to becoming radicalized and committing acts of mass violence. CVE programs have evolved to include the growing threat of far-right and White supremacist violence. However, in practice, Muslims remain the main targets of CVE programs.

Mental Health Stigmatization

CVE programs criminalize those struggling with mental health by encouraging institutions and the public to view them as potential public safety threats. Medical professionals, especially mental health practitioners, are required to monitor and report potentially violent behavior—often perpetuating anti-Muslim and racist attitudes in the medical field by linking poor mental health to a greater risk of radicalization and committing acts of mass violence. While HIPAA may protect patients' privacy, the law contains a clause for healthcare workers to provide private health information to law enforcement under certain circumstances without a patient's authorization or knowledge. CVE programs undermine trust and safety in medical settings, discouraging vulnerable people from getting appropriate healthcare out of fear of punitive treatment. Mental health stigmatization also becomes a scapegoat that individualizes violence and avoids a systems analysis. Rather than recognizing that status quo systems such as racial capitalism or White supremacy produce inequalities and forms of oppression that in turn become justifications for social movement actors to script political violence against stigmatized or vulnerable groups, CVE programs direct attention away from the systemic causes of violence.

Securitization of Communities

CVE deputizes individuals to surveil their communities, dividing and embedding

them in broader carceral systems. This process of securitization primes community members to define and anticipate a crime well before one has happened. Under the guise of community outreach, CVE protocols make these communities less safe by making vulnerable community members like children, youth, refugees, formerly incarcerated people, those with mental health struggles or disabilities, and community activists especially susceptible to profiling and criminalization. These protocols also fragment communities by creating rampant distrust, fear, and anxiety and placing law enforcement between communities and much-needed resources, keeping vulnerable communities and individuals within a cycle of carceral violence.

Political Repression

Chilled speech, community fragmentation, institutional and community mistrust, and isolation are direct consequences of CVE programs. As a strategy for social and political control, CVE targets activists and political dissenters, and represses communities from organizing politically, socially, and religiously. Communities are more likely to be dissuaded from organizing internally or with others to avoid being flagged.

Find Out More

These articles and webinars will help you build your knowledge further.

To Read Right Now

● **#StopCVE Now.** *Muslim Justice League.* 2020.

● **Why Countering Violent Extremism Programs Are Bad Policy.** *Brennan Center for Justice.* 2019.

● **"Countering Violent Extremism," A Flawed Approach to Law Enforcement.** *American Civil Liberties Union.* 2018.

● **Why Did A Muslim Civil Rights Group Oppose Democrats' Plans To Confront White Nationalism?** Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Brannon Ingram. *Religion Dispatches.* 2019.

● **Threat Assessment: Where Difficulties, Dissent, and Disability Become Harbingers of Violence.** Cody Bloomfield. *Defending Rights and Dissent.* 2022.

In Depth

● **CVE and White Supremacy: The Trap of Equal Opportunity Surveillance.** Fatema Ahmad. *Muslim Justice League.* 2021.

● **Suspected and Surveilled.** Nicole Nguyen and Debbie Southorn. *The American Friends Service Committee.* 2019.

● **The Mental Health Industry and State Surveillance.** Presented by Vigilant Love, StopCVE Coalition, and Bilal Nasir. *YouTube.* 2019.

Become an Expert

● **Community Investment, Not Criminalization.** Harsha Panduranga. *Brennan Center for Justice.* 2021.

● **Countering Violent Extremism.** Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik. *Brennan Center for Justice.* 2017.

● **The People's Review of Prevent.** John Holmwood and Layla Aitlhadj. *Prevent Watch.* 2022.