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Empowering Bystanders to Report Concerns About Violent Extremism

This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.

Source article

Sara K. Thompson, Michele Grossman, and Paul Thomas, "Needs, Rights, and Systems: Increasing Canadian Intimate Bystander Reporting on Radicalizing to Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 36, no. 5 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2188964.

Key Takeaways

- Most intimate bystanders identified clear triggers that would justify reporting to law enforcement, such as specific plans or behaviors that signal a serious or imminent threat.
- Many intimate bystanders were hesitant to involve law enforcement and instead sought out other resources before reporting.
- Intimate bystanders generally preferred to report confidentially to a human being (in-person or over the phone) and preferred to receive follow-up contact to learn the outcome of the report.
- Bystander awareness campaigns should focus on educating the community about a wide range of warning signs, instead of focusing specifically on those associated with imminent threats.
- Concerns about safety, stigma, and damage to relationships often make reporting emotionally challenging, so access to support systems and educational resources is crucial. Some reporters may require mental health support to address anxiety, fear, guilt, and grief associated with reporting.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Perpetrators of violent extremism often show warning signs that are first recognized by the people closest to them—friends, family, and community members. These "intimate bystanders" are in a unique position to notice warning signs and help prevent violence. However, previous research in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US showed that community members often face barriers such as fear of retaliation, lack of trust in authorities, and confusion about how to report.[1] These studies also found that people want support, clear information, and respect for their rights. The researchers noted that this topic had been understudied in Canada, especially among diverse communities and in the context of Canadian laws and services.

The primary goal of this study was to understand what makes people in Canadian communities decide to report (or not report) concerns about someone close to them who may be radicalizing to violence. The researchers wanted to find out what helps or

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stops people from coming forward, what kind of support they need, and how they view their rights and responsibilities in the process.

Methodology

The study focused on three Canadian cities that have experienced extremist violence: Toronto, London (Ontario), and Calgary. In interviews, researchers asked 97 community members to respond to realistic scenarios about someone close to them (a friend or family member) who might be radicalizing to violence. The researchers used a structured approach to analyze the interviews, looking for common themes and patterns in responses.

Findings

- **Resources.** Participants expressed a desire for curated, relevant, and easy-to-understand information about what warning signs look like, how to report concerns, what options are available, what legal risks and protections are involved in reporting, and what happens once a report is made.
- **Trust.** When first becoming concerned about someone close to them, many were hesitant to involve the police; they preferred to gather information and attempt to intervene directly if possible. Concerns about safety, stigma, and damage to relationships often made this stage emotionally challenging, so participants expressed a desire for support systems.
- **When to report.** Participants described clear triggers for moving forward with a report, most often specific plans or behaviors that, to them, signaled a serious risk of violence.
- **How to report.** They preferred to report through familiar and trusted channels, such as friends, relatives, counselors, or trusted community figures, but they saw police as the right option when they perceived a serious or imminent threat. They strongly preferred direct human contact, either face-to-face or by telephone. Reporting was described as emotionally complex, with respondents expressing both relief and anxiety; they highlighted the need for support from counselors, trusted community members, and legal advisors.
- **Confidentiality.** Participants emphasized the importance of protecting their identity, with most preferring confidentiality (versus full anonymity) to protect both themselves and the person of concern while allowing for follow-up.
- **After reporting.** The majority wanted follow-up communication to find out whether they had done the right thing and whether their report was being taken seriously. They anticipated mixed or conflicting emotions about reporting—relief but also anxiety, fear, guilt, and concerns about safety. Some indicated they would need professional counseling support at this stage to help manage the psychological ramifications of reporting.
- **Consistent results.** The study's findings are consistent with previous research performed in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US, strengthening the knowledge base for bystander reporting best practices.

How can practitioners working in primary prevention program development use these findings?

- Make reporting easy. Provide options to report in person to a human being.
- Train frontline practitioners on providing support for intimate bystanders and have resources and referrals available to address the mental health needs of intimate bystanders.
- When an intimate bystander does report, ensure follow-up contact occurs to reinforce the decision to report and communicate any disclosable outcomes.
- Provide resources for intimate bystanders who have concerns but are not ready to report. These resources can encourage reporting but should also include education on less-obvious warning signs, advice on how to preserve relationships and support individuals in need, and nonreporting referral options to mental health services, support groups, and other resources.

[1] Michele Grossman, *Community Reporting Thresholds: Sharing Information with Authorities Concerning Violent Extremist Activity and Involvement in Foreign Conflict*, Countering Violent Extremism Subcommittee, Australia-New Zealand Counterterrorism Committee, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330701084_Community_Reporting_Thresholds_Sharing_information_with_authorities_concerning_violent_extremist_activity_and_involvement_in_foreign_conflict; Paul Thomas et al., *Community Reporting Thresholds: Sharing Information with Authorities Concerning Violent Extremist Activity and Involvement in Foreign Conflict*, CREST, 2017, https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/community-reporting-thresholds-full-report/.

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