

Conference Report
Annual NCTC Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference 2018

Executive Summary

On 5-6 November 2018, the National Counterterrorism Center hosted the seventh annual Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference¹, “**Terrorism Prevention: Addressing both Domestic² and Foreign³ Terrorism in the U.S.**” The conference brought together approximately 250 practitioners from across federal, state, and local government to discuss best practices, current and future issues, and solutions for preventing violent extremism in the United States (US). The timing of the conference coincided with the White House’s release of the 2018 National Strategy to Counter Terrorism (NSCT), which focuses attention on prevention efforts and domestic terrorism. Attendees echoed the importance of incorporating these key issues into the NSCT’s implementation.

Key Conclusions from Speaker Remarks:

- Despite continued investment in kinetic counterterrorism (CT) measures, the terrorism threat continues to metastasize and worsen. Multiple speakers and attendees remarked that the U.S. needs to invest more in non-kinetic measures.⁴
- Many practitioners observed a change from the more traditional paradigm in radicalization and mobilization from using violence to justify an ideology to instead selecting an ideology to justify violence -- “*violence as an ideology*,” with the specific doctrine less important than the violence it condones.
- There are significant differences between the way that foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and domestic terrorist (DT) movements function in the US; many of these differences are due to protections of the First Amendment.
- Speakers discussed concerns with the potential for radicalization and terrorist recruitment within the prison system, noting the need for early risk assessments for radicalization of new prisoners and better educated/informed staff.
- The US health care provider population would benefit from instituting training for mental health clinicians to understand ideological violence.
- The US government approach to DT is largely shaped by the current legal structure; specifically, DT is not a chargeable offense in Federal Criminal Code. There has been an apparent increase in DT-related offenses which has engendered a debate on the merits of creating a DT statute.
- Interventions are most effective if they happen early in the radicalization to violence process. Programs should be expanded to increase awareness of and inoculate against radicalization to violence for middle-school aged children and their educators.

¹ Terrorism Prevention activities seek to proactively preempt violent extremists from radicalizing and mobilizing individuals to violence. They empower local partners and civil society to prevent terrorist recruitment and complement law enforcement tools, public safety program, and overall violence prevention efforts to keep Americans safe.

² Domestic Terrorism includes individuals based and operating entirely within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seek to further political or social goals, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence.

³ International Terrorism refers to individuals inspired, directed, or enabled by a foreign terrorist organization, as designated by the U.S. Department of State.

⁴ NCTC defines non-kinetic CT activities as those related to preventing terrorist travel, denying terrorists resources and access to global financial systems, contesting terrorist use of the internet, supplanting terrorist propaganda with a positive message and preventing radicalization to violence..

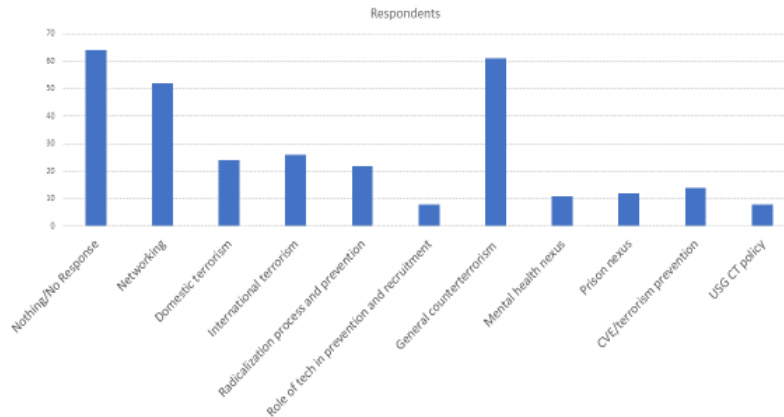
Conference Report

Annual NCTC Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference 2018

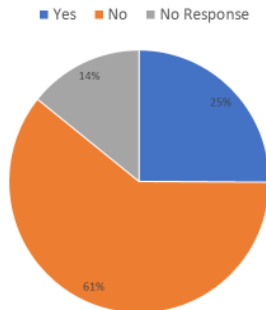
Attendees

NCTC's Terrorism Prevention Practitioner conference remains the only annual terrorism prevention conference hosted by the federal government. Over 250 attended representing federal, state and local government entities, with 61% indicating this was their first time in attendance. The top reasons for attending the conference included: a general desire for counterterrorism information; a desire for networking; an interest in learning more about international and domestic terrorism.

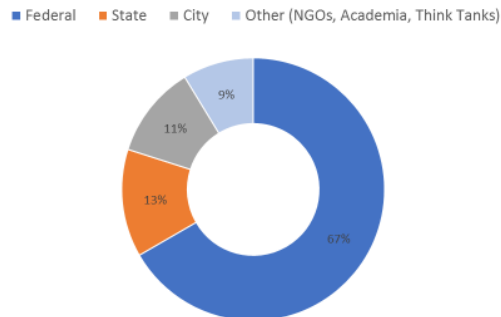
What do you hope to get out of this conference?



Have you attended this conference before?



Registered Attendee's Organizations



Conference Overview

Throughout the two-day conference, speakers and panelists discussed topics related to Terrorism Prevention in the U.S. The conference followed Chatham house rules. The following themes framed the discussions:

- The Current Terrorism Threat
- Messaging and Online Recruitment
- Prison Radicalization and Recidivism
- The Role of Mental Health in Radicalization
- Law Enforcement Approaches
- Interventions and Off-ramping

Conference Report
Annual NCTC Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference 2018

The Current Terrorism Threat

In the 17 years since 9/11, the U.S. Government has developed the most advanced and capable CT enterprise in the world. The U.S security apparatus is exponentially more advanced in capturing, detaining, and arresting known terrorists. However, the threat of terrorism continues to worsen and the threat from homegrown violence extremists (HVEs) and domestic terrorist movements remains and grows steadily more challenging. There are some notable trends in violent white supremacist extremism, becoming more mainstream and more accessible on social media.

“Are we serious as a government about non-kinetic solutions to terrorism?”

In the kinetic space, various agencies and military services have learned to work together, establishing a common goal and sense of purpose; the same cannot be said in the prevention space. There is no institutionalized structure that brings together the various parts of the U.S. Government needed to work holistically on prevention. There are insufficient institutionalized relationships between federal and local actors, including those from civil society and other non-governmental actors. Because the US CT enterprise is largely limited to law enforcement and kinetic disruption efforts, conference speakers questioned whether the U.S. Government has failed to adequately address root drivers of terrorism and whether it has appropriately invested in the prevention space. Attendees agreed that the U.S. is not yet serious about non-kinetic solutions, only investing a fraction of CT spending in prevention-focused efforts.

Messaging and Online Recruitment

Conference speakers discussed the role of the internet in recruitment and radicalization, noting its ever-growing influence. The evolution of social media has gone from simple broadcast mechanisms like Myspace and Facebook, to secure two-way interactive applications like Telegram where groups form to connect, share, teach, recruit and radicalize more easily. In terms of messaging platforms, violent extremists rely on several categories of on-line applications. They often try to replace traditional platforms with their own. They try to leverage gaming sites to connect with witting or unwitting recruits. For some, they use sites like Discord, while still maintaining visibility on mainstream platforms such as Twitter for broader access to more people. Finally, some retreat from more public platforms opting instead for encrypted direct messaging apps, like Telegram and Wire. Prevention efforts would benefit from efforts tailored both to the type of app used as well as to how the apps are being used.

For ISIS, the recruitment process has evolved from using supporters of the organization to build support to a process that has institutionalized the production and promulgation of propaganda. The group started using speeches by leaders to shape their strategy, disseminating explicit doctrine to ISIS supporters or those curious about ISIS and has evolved to include the issuance of operational instructions via publically visible and encrypted websites. This evolution has become critical to the group’s continued operational capability as it has shifted the focus of effort to external operations.

Conference Report

Annual NCTC Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference 2018

Prevention is seen as more difficult for domestic terrorism because the legal space is broader than for foreign terrorist organizations. And yet, the US needs to focus more on prevention and inoculation rather than on how to react or respond to a violent event. Additionally, there needs to be more programs to engage youth and adults who work with youth populations, particularly at younger ages, as course-correcting is easier than “de-radicalizing” in later years. While every path to radicalization and mobilization is unique, there are tripwires or indicators along the way that could alert intervening action at the local level.

Prison Radicalization and Recidivism

Several discussions revolved around prison radicalization and recidivism. The U.S. has the biggest prison population in the world, as well as the highest recidivism rates in the world; and yet, incidents of terrorist radicalization and recidivism for terrorist-related prisoners is low. The U.S. provides an array of programming at the federal level, in which many inmates have the option to participate. In comparison to other countries, there are few incidents of individuals radicalizing to violence within the federal prison system. However, state and county prisons do not always benefit from similar infrastructure, prison expertise or experience to deal with radicalization concerns. Speakers noted that to avoid prison radicalization and recidivism issues, it is important to focus on producing national education programs for people who work with prisoners. Although some training programs have been developed, including in Minneapolis, there are no standard programs established across the whole of the incarceration systems, largely due to a lack of dedicated resources. Of note, the UK, considered more advanced, has invested \$67 million in this space.

There is not one solution; there needs to be local, tailored approaches

Speakers also highlighted that declining prison conditions can contribute to radicalization, noting many radicalized inmates have come from such prisons. Speakers suggested an application of different risk guidelines and risk factors to assess new inmates at risk for radicalization. Speakers also noted that religious conversion in prison is often a good thing, aiding in rehabilitation; and there are relatively few cases where prisoners have used religious conversion to justify violence.

The Role of Mental Health in Radicalization

According to speakers, the U.S. does not contend with mental health or addiction issues effectively, often due to related stigmas and lack of understanding – and yet, both issues often play significant roles in the radicalization process. The complexity of mental health, the impact of trauma on the mind, and psychological and group dynamics impact the mind functions and may contribute to decisions to act violently.

Speakers discussed concerns with surrounding the perceived securitization of mental health, noting the need for a community-wide effort to address such concerns, benefiting from a multi-sector effort with crisis workers, law enforcement personnel, policy makers and others. Also, universities need to be better about teaching clinicians about radicalization and ideological violence. In order for this to happen, there needs to be a formal mechanism creating for information sharing between law enforcement and clinical providers.

Conference Report Annual NCTC Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference 2018

Law Enforcement Approaches

Law enforcement would benefit from communities that understand and are taught to recognize radicalization. In fact, in many cases, bystanders who recognized signs of radicalized homegrown violent extremists provided information used to disrupt attacks. Trust must be established between law enforcement and communities and can/should be done through a variety of positive community engagements beyond terrorism prevention and countering violent extremism.

According to speakers, law enforcement uses different approaches when investigating domestic terrorism versus foreign terrorist organizations. For example, law enforcement can question a person who claims to be associated with a foreign terrorist organization, but the same cannot be said for someone simply claiming to be associated with a known domestic terrorist movement. Hate speech is not a crime in the U.S., however, making specific and credible threats and inciting violence are.

Interventions and Off-Ramping

There are three key components to preventing violent extremism: early education, early intervention, and off-ramping efforts. Interventions should happen earlier in the radicalization process, when opportunities to dissuade individuals are more abundant. The U.S. would benefit from more programs that engage youth at earlier ages, recognizing it more difficult to de-radicalize later in life. This model is not unique to terrorist-related extremism, as such efforts in this space would benefit from understanding or being integrated into other intervention programs (e.g. gang violence or suicide prevention).

Speakers highlighted that there is no single approach or solution in the intervention or off-ramping space requiring local and tailored approaches to each situation. While every path to radicalization and mobilization is unique, there are tripwires or indicators that can be identified and acted upon. Speakers argued that the U.S. needs to focus more on prevention and inoculation rather than solely what happens *after* someone has radicalized to violence.

A lack of social structure or group involvement can provide a potential opening for violent extremist groups or movements.

Speakers shared their stories as former violent extremists including their pathways into and out of violent extremism. They described experiencing deep seated negative emotions, criminal behavior, and early childhood trauma. Each echoed the importance of both positive influences and activities – experiencing kindness and community – in helping them find a new path.

All agreed that prevention methodologies should prove more cost effective than traditional kinetic methods and could dissuade people from even entering violent pathways. However, research is needed to help provide evidence that such methodologies work.

Conference Report
Annual NCTC Terrorism Prevention Practitioner Conference 2018

Conclusion

With the release of the NSCT, the U.S. Government has an opportunity to broaden the traditional focus of CT from kinetic to non-kinetic prevention. The U.S. must prove itself serious in this space by developing policy guidance, dedicating resources and allowing for experimentation and risk-taking to identify that which does and does not work.