

# THE Nation.

## Inside Trump's Divisive Mission to Identify and Deter Potential Extremists

Julia Harte

March 2, 2020

Boston's Roxbury neighborhood is a historically black part of the city, straddling a blighted past and a gentrifying future. It is home to some of Massachusetts's oldest colonial sites and a large Somali community; it also has one of Boston's highest crime rates. Police officers frequent its streets, squares, and transit hubs, enforcing a citywide stop-and-frisk program.

Roxbury is also the site of a federally funded initiative to stop potential terrorists. The Boston Police Department participated in what the plan's proponents described as trust-building workshops with Somali youths under an almost \$500,000 counterextremism project that ended last fall.

Six months after Donald Trump was sworn in as president, the Department of Homeland Security awarded \$10 million to 25 law enforcement, public safety, and civil society groups across the country for programs intended to prevent people from embracing violent extremist ideologies. Some grant projects encouraged community members to report acts that might be seen as early signs of radicalization. Others trained cops to spot potential extremist behavior. Several mentored children with the aim of instilling in them a truer understanding of Islam, an aversion to violence, or simply more respect for the police.

The DHS invited initiatives combating any form of terrorism to apply when it announced the funding opportunity in 2016. But two-thirds of the applications chosen by the Trump administration focused on immigrants or Muslims, even though white supremacists and other domestic terrorists have caused more deaths and led to more arrests in recent years than extremists inspired by foreign ideologies. And several grant recipients described their projects as run-of-the-mill community programs, without disclosing to participants that they were funded by the DHS and were targeting those it deemed susceptible to violent extremism.

DHS officials and grantees said the projects sought to remove the barriers between minority groups and law enforcement and local leaders, not to engage in racial or religious profiling. They aimed to reduce antisocial tendencies on the premise that well-adjusted people are less likely to become radicalized. But civil rights advocates said they bred more fear than trust.

"A lot of Muslims now have to worry, 'If I go to this after-school program, this social service, does it only exist because they think I'm a ticking time bomb?'" said Fatema Ahmad, the director of the Boston-based Muslim Justice League, a civil rights group for those imperiled by

national security policy. For the past three years, she has been meeting with minority communities around the country and hearing how counterextremism programs, from the FBI's operations around 9/11 to the less conspicuous projects funded in 2017, have made them feel surveilled and mistrusted by local and federal authorities. She also opposes such programs for white, non-Muslim communities. Flagging noncriminal behavior as a risk factor for extremism threatens everyone's civil rights, she said.

Even before the existence of the program in Boston, the pressure on Somali Americans there was intense. Abdulkadir Hussein, the founder of African Community Economic Development of New England (ACEDONE), a Roxbury-based nonprofit organization for East African immigrants, told me that over the past decade and a half, he has gotten accustomed to federal agents asking about extremism in his community. "The FBI, Homeland Security—we're always open-minded when they come to us," said Hussein, an energetic man with a trim mustache. But the youth-police workshops alarmed him because they were initially presented as an ordinary kids' activity, not as a federally funded counterextremism program. "If you're acting like you're not treating us as suspicious when you clearly are, we won't trust you."

Sara (who asked me not to use her real name) is a single mother from Somalia who became a US citizen some years ago. She sported henna tattoos and colorful scarves under a puffy coat in the Boston winter. Like pretty much every mother of a teenage son, Sara said, she worries when he's out at night—except that in this case she's less worried about street crime than about his being targeted by overzealous cops. (Her son declined to be interviewed.)

"He's afraid of walking in groups," she said, flipping her cell phone anxiously in her hand. In 2014 the refugee center at Boston Children's Hospital surveyed 120 young people of Somali descent and found that more than a quarter experienced some kind of contact with police in the past year. The Boston Police Department stopped releasing data about police-civilian encounters in 2016, a year after researchers from Columbia, Rutgers and the University of Massachusetts found that almost two-thirds of such encounters involved black civilians, even though they constitute just a quarter of the city's population.

Sara's son was exactly the kind of person the DHS-funded counterextremism program hoped to attract: a Somali American teenager wary of cops. In its grant application, the Police Foundation, a policing research organization, asserted that by dispelling such negative perceptions, the workshops would make young people more resistant to terrorist recruitment. But by treating Somali youths as susceptible to terrorist recruitment in the first place, the project further alienated Sara and her son. Compounded by an atmosphere of xenophobia and Islamophobia, counterextremism efforts made them and many others like them feel as though they were suspicious until proven innocent.

To find participants for its workshops, the Police Foundation partnered with a Somali community association as well as a national nonprofit that had run youth-police programs in Boston for years. The aim was to improve relations between Somali youth and the police, said Jay Paris, a director at the nonprofit who codirected most of the workshops. Although the young people in these DHS-funded workshops had opportunities to report anything that "concerned" them about their peers' behavior, "this wasn't about trying to ferret out violent extremists," Paris continued. The teenagers recruited for the program were told that it was a trust-building exercise with police.

But local Somali leaders were skeptical, and their concerns grew as more details emerged. Shortly after the project was funded in 2017, the community association that had agreed to recruit Somali youths withdrew its support when its director saw the questionnaires to be given to the young participants before and after the workshops. The surveys asked questions like “What is your attitude toward Muslim radicalization in general?” with possible responses ranging from “very negative” to “very positive.”

“I have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the intentions of the program,” wrote Deeqo Jibril, the association’s executive director, in an October 2017 e-mail to the project’s leaders, including Frank Straub, a director at the Police Foundation. “Focusing efforts specifically on one subgroup will ultimately create deeper divisions.” (Jibril did not respond to requests for comment.)

Straub acknowledged in an interview that he had not heard of any terrorism recruitment among Boston’s Somali community. But, he pointed out, Somalis in other parts of the country were involved in extremist plots, such as several from Minnesota who attempted to join the Islamic State from 2014 to 2016. “Clearly, there was precedent that had been set, primarily in Minneapolis, that showed the Somali community might be vulnerable to these types of activities,” Straub said.

After Jibril’s departure, the surveys were revised to omit questions about radicalization. But the Police Foundation plowed ahead with its counterextremism program, partnering with another community organization, United Somali Youth, which hosted extracurricular activities and helped find jobs for young Somalis in Boston.

Sara’s son had been part of United Somali Youth for years. In late 2017, however, he told her about a new program that the group’s head, Said Ahmed, was encouraging kids to join. Her son told her that he would have to fill out a survey to participate and that it would involve spending time with police officers. She withdrew him from the organization immediately.

“We cannot trust the police when they’re calling our kids terrorists,” she said, noting that she learned from other parents that the DHS funded the program on the premise that Somali youths were prone to violent extremism. “They’re not terrorists. They’re born here. They grow up here. They come home here.”

Over the next two years, 46 police officers and 85 Somali children—the youngest of them 10 years old—participated in the counterextremism program. The youths spent the first three days of the five-day workshops with trainers, discussing their attitudes toward police and their experiences with racism and Islamophobia. Police officers joined them for the last two days. According to Paris, no potential terrorism threats were detected.

Only at the end of the training, he said, did a trainer who was present for all five days reveal that she was a cop. It was a way of showing that the police are regular people. “She didn’t want [the young people] to judge her off the bat,” Paris said.

The Boston Police Department declined to make officers who participated in the program available for interviews. In September 2019, Ahmed organized a “graduation” dinner for the families and officers who participated. It was attended by 21 Somali youths, 11 of their relatives, and two police officers. Ahmed refused to let me attend the dinner and—despite initially agreeing to an interview—soon stopped responding to my requests.

Some statements made by participants at the dinner were included, without attribution, in the Police Foundation's final report to the DHS. Some came from the police officers—"the biggest takeaway for me was, these Somali kids are just like other kids"—but most were glowing endorsements from the youths. "I'm not scared anymore when cops look at me," one said. "I'm thinking of going into the police academy," said another.

The surveys administered before and just after the workshops showed an increase in the number of youths saying they trusted the police, though the report also noted that when surveys were offered months later, fewer than a third of the participants answered them.

For the Trump administration, the results showed that Boston's Somali community had grown more resistant to the lure of violent extremism, even though there were no prior indications of terrorist involvement by anyone in the community. The youth-police workshops were touted within the DHS as one of the biggest successes of the counterextremism grant program, according to an official there. If the Police Foundation applied for a future grant to hold the same youth-police workshops in other cities, "they could easily bubble up to the top of the competition," said the official.

Nasteho Ali, 23, an ACEDONE youth coordinator with a cheerful smile, said she was skeptical of the survey results, explaining that many participants joined because they relied on United Somali Youth to find summer jobs and play sports outside school. "But a lot of them are still having negative interactions with the police on their walk home from school or when they hang out late at night. There are these constant reminders that [the police] are actually not their friends," she said. What's more, none of the teenagers were willing to go on the record for this story about their time in the program—a reflection of how they feared losing access to United Somali Youth's resources and being viewed with suspicion by their community.

Sara said the program actually heightened mistrust of the police for her son and his friends. "They're more concerned now," she said. "One thing I know: They're not going to run to the police now. They're afraid of the police."

Like many of the Trump era's national security initiatives, the Boston workshops and other counterextremism projects grew out of an effort launched by President Barack Obama. Dubbed "countering violent extremism" (CVE) when it was unveiled in 2011, the federal strategy took a softer, more preemptive approach to counterterrorism.

CVE strategy encouraged federal officials to foster relationships with local leaders who could identify areas where their community was vulnerable to radicalization, deterring potential terrorists before they committed any crimes. But even as zeal for the approach mounted in Washington, the authorities quickly found that many of the people who ended up in the programs resented the government for designating them as potential terrorists in the first place. Perceptions of CVE varied, depending on which side of the strategy one viewed it from. This tension between national security and civil rights concerns has been a recurrent issue in the various CVE programs, including in a Washington, DC, suburb that was one of the first laboratories.

Shortly after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, officials in Montgomery County, Maryland, began a campaign aimed at bridging gaps between the county's different ethnic and religious groups. They teamed up with the World Organization for Resource Development and Education

(WORDE), a nonprofit led by Hedieh Mirahmadi, a lawyer and then-devout Muslim who wore a head wrap.

With her history of working with law enforcement, Mirahmadi seemed like the ideal person to foster greater trust of county officials in minority communities, said Tom Manger, a former police chief of Montgomery County. “I loved Hedieh back then. I thought she was a great partner.”

After initiating public seminars about the “warning signs” of violent extremism and an intervention system for Muslims flagged as potential extremists, WORDE became a poster child for the CVE strategy: proof that a federally backed but community-led effort could sniff out Muslim youths who appeared to exhibit early signs of radicalization and bring them in for counseling.

Yet WORDE wasn’t finding much evidence of radicalization. Of the few cases reported to community organizations, only one or two were referred to the county police, Manger said, and they were too minor to merit further action. “Referrals happened seldom enough that, in and of itself, it made the effort lose some steam.” Despite the lack of clear results, the group received federal funds and accolades, and Mirahmadi met with Obama and spoke at government CVE events. (Asked for an interview, Mirahmadi said she was no longer involved in CVE programs.)

Outside official circles, concerns began to swirl about WORDE that would haunt future CVE programs. A local civil rights coalition started hearing that WORDE was flagging Muslims as potential extremists based on the political views they aired, such as criticism of US foreign policy. One Muslim woman whose teenagers used to volunteer at WORDE, preparing meals for the needy, said she was “shocked” and “disappointed” when she learned that the group was trying to identify young people at risk of radicalization; she hadn’t known about its counterterrorism endeavors. When word spread that Mirahmadi had a side job with the FBI that she hadn’t disclosed, some Montgomery County residents feared she was sharing information about WORDE participants with federal authorities. (Mirahmadi’s [LinkedIn page](#) doesn’t mention WORDE, although it does say she was a senior consultant for the FBI from January 2015 to June 2017.)

Mirahmadi’s political views also began to interfere with her CVE work. In the year after Trump’s election, she began working with former Milwaukee sheriff [David Clarke](#)—a right-wing celebrity who nearly became an assistant DHS secretary—meeting with top Trump officials, and drifting further from WORDE. She left altogether after her FBI work became public, according to Manger. “As that came out and she got more political, it gave more fuel to the fire of the critics.”

Though she abandoned Islam, Mirahmadi is still trying to guide Muslims toward what she sees as a better path: born-again Christianity. “Maybe you want to evangelize to your Muslim friends but don’t know how,” she writes on her [website](#), which advertises her new organization, Resurrect Ministry, and describes her career as one built around defeating “Islamic terrorism.”

Montgomery County officials said her CVE program actually hindered their efforts. “We were trying to help the Muslim community feel safer, but then Hedieh went off in her own direction,” said the Rev. Mansfield Kaseman, the county’s interfaith community liaison. Others said the fear of federal surveillance hamstrung WORDE’s trust-building efforts. According to Mehreen

Farooq, who worked at WORDE for eight years, “The window of opportunity for the federal government to credibly solicit community-based support for this sort of work has closed.”

Trump’s professed view that Islam hates the United States has informed many of his policies. It has also helped reshape the federal CVE grant program, concentrating more money on initiatives that primarily target Muslims and immigrants. Under Trump, the DHS stripped several grassroots organizations and a group that combated white supremacy of CVE funds that were awarded under Obama. It also changed the criteria for grants to favor applicants that would partner with the police.

“That was one of the key factors that contributed to my decision to leave government,” said George Selim, who led DHS and interagency CVE programs and policy until July 2017. Trump’s polarizing rhetoric about minorities has left Selim questioning whether future DHS-funded CVE programs could achieve their intended purpose.

One of the beneficiaries of Trump’s changes to the 2017 program was the sheriff’s office in Hennepin County, Minnesota, home to a Somali immigrant population much larger than Boston’s. Unlike in Boston, Somali American youths in the Twin Cities have been prosecuted for trying to join the Islamic State. As a result, the reason for the Hennepin sheriff’s program was clearer, but its single-minded focus on immigrant youth made it just as alarming for community members as the Boston workshops.

Rich Stanek, the sheriff at the time, was a vocal Trump supporter who shared his belief that the refugees “pouring in” to his jurisdiction posed a security threat. His office used its \$347,600 DHS grant to teach immigrant families—especially Somalis—to look for signs of radicalization in their children. In meetings at East African community centers, officers taught parents about “social media threats” and “strategies to prevent radicalization.” Those who attended were encouraged to ask their children probing questions about what they did outside parental supervision, according to one community group that hosted a workshop. (The sheriff’s office declined an interview request.)

After a new sheriff was elected in 2018, those efforts ceased. But at a DHS roundtable in St. Paul in 2019, a member of the sheriff’s community engagement team said of one old tactic, parental monitoring of their kids’ online activity, “That’s what we teach the parents. ‘I can look now at my daughter. She’s doing homework now.’”

It’s impossible to know whether any kids have been pulled from the brink of radicalization by such efforts. But the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has documented how the perception that Muslims are susceptible to radicalization endangers them.

CAIR periodically receives reports about Somalis in the state having epithets like “terrorist” and “ISIS” hurled at them by people wielding knives, drivers try to run them off the road, and high school bullies torment them. Only two Somalis were convicted of plotting or committing terrorist attacks on US soil from 1975 to 2015, according to a study by the libertarian Cato Institute.

The effectiveness of CVE programs is shaky at best because they rely on flawed stereotypes about what potential extremists look like, said Jaylani Hussein, the Minnesota CAIR chapter’s executive director, noting that the Somalis who tried to join the Islamic State in the mid-2010s had few of the usual indicators that CVE programs looked for.

In fact, before one leading member of that group was charged, court records show, his relatives began promoting local CVE efforts alongside the federal prosecutor who charged him. Also, some people joined the CVE programs out of fear that not participating would draw reprisals from authorities, according to Hussein.

“A lot of us are now really hesitant to be as involved with our mosques because we feel like they’ve become a compromised space for the community,” said Burhan Mohamed, a community organizer from Minneapolis. He said early CVE efforts in the Twin Cities were more heavy-handed than the projects the DHS funded in 2017. He recalled a 2014 meeting at his community center where DHS officials had attendees brainstorm about a scenario that struck him as racist: “Ali was radicalized. How can we help Ali?”

Since then, he said, the CVE programs have gotten subtler. “They’re disguised as just another social service. But the community as a whole is being seen as a terror hub, where everyone is someone that could possibly be radicalized.”

As CVE programs and policy have proliferated, they have drawn censure even from mainstream institutions. A 2019 report by Duke University’s Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security criticized the Obama administration’s CVE initiative for its top-down approach, vague goals, and “virtually exclusive focus on engagement with Muslim-American communities.”

Selim said critics of CVE misunderstood its aim. “It fits a convenient narrative that the government and security agencies are only targeting Muslims because the government thinks all Muslims are terrorists,” said Selim, who is now a senior vice president at the Anti-Defamation League. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Federal CVE programs were designed without any particular extremist ideology in mind, he continued. Many applications for the 2017 grants focused on the threat of Islamic State radicalization because they were written during its peak, he said, but the resulting programs developed methods that could combat any violent ideology.

The risk factors that can incline a person toward radicalization are not linked to ethnicity, race, or religion but rather to conditions like isolation and familial conflict, said one DHS official. CVE programs aim to “disrupt” a person with such risk factors from turning to extremism. But since it’s nearly impossible to prove that a CVE program stopped a person from radicalizing, the DHS measures its success with other metrics, such as how many people attended a program and how well they retained the material it presented.

Civil rights advocates fear that the federal government uses CVE programs to gather intelligence about suspected extremists, pointing to people like Mirahmadi and the undisclosed job she had at the FBI. Concern that the Trump administration would obtain personal data about CVE participants fueled an opposition campaign that forced Los Angeles to forfeit a \$425,000 grant it received in 2017. A DHS official said the department never received personally identifiable information from CVE programs.

Paradoxically, however, those privacy concerns have simply bred more secrecy. The DHS did not require its 2017 grantees to identify their work as CVE, and many programs buried the CVE content in other kinds of initiatives. For some CVE projects, the DHS even waived a standard requirement that grantees publicly credit the department for their funding. “How prominently

they advertised that it was funded by the Department of Homeland Security, that was up to them,” a DHS official said.

The counterextremism elements of the programs were often so subtle and their origins and funding so elided that subjects did not know they were participating in a DHS-funded counterextremism program. One such program took place in California’s Bay Area, where, as in Boston’s and Minnesota’s programs, local law enforcement sought to deter radicalization among Muslims. But after pushback from civil rights groups, the grantee abandoned its Muslim focus and morphed into a wide-ranging community program with a better shot at winning over residents.

In November 2018, two clinicians from a behavioral health nonprofit visited the Glenn Dyer jail in Oakland, California, to pitch a “mindfulness” workshop to its inmates. An imposing high-rise in downtown Oakland with the slit-windowed aspect of a medieval fortress, Glenn Dyer held roughly 420 individuals at the time, including federal inmates and former or current gang members.

Bearing flyers that read “Transform yourself” and “Free your mind,” the clinicians asked inmates if they wanted to learn techniques for dealing with stress, communicating more effectively, and healing past traumas. Their nonprofit, the Mind Body Awareness Project, has taught mindfulness in schools and jails for two decades. According to one inmate who participated in the program and answered written questions via e-mail through his lawyer, it looked like “a way to change behavior so that you help yourself and others.”

The clinicians did not tell the inmates that their workshops were funded by a \$500,000 CVE grant to the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office in 2017.

The original grant application pledged to “identify and support justice involved adults considered susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism,” noting that the county’s jails held 123 Muslims. To deliver mental health services to the inmates, the sheriff’s office partnered with a Muslim nonprofit, the Ta’leef Collective. But soon after the grant was awarded, Ta’leef’s executive director pulled out when local Muslim leaders voiced concerns about the CVE funding.

Rami Nsour was one such critic. An imam who cofounded a faith-based education and reentry services provider in the Bay Area, he questioned the program’s focus on Muslims. In his experience, he said, white supremacists posed a bigger threat in California’s carceral system. He feared that inmates would not be told what they were participating in, leading some to say things that could get them into trouble. “In prison,” he said, “you can be sent to solitary or denied parole just because someone says you’re teaching extremism.”

After Ta’leef withdrew, the sheriff’s office found a new partner in the Mind Body Awareness Project. In a 2019 report to the DHS, the sheriff’s office acknowledged “validity” in the fear that a CVE program “could theoretically be used in a way that was discriminatory toward Muslims.” To prevent bias from seeping in, the office sought evidence-based risk assessment tools for gauging a person’s violent extremism potential, consulting Brette Steele, a DHS official who facilitated federal-local terrorism prevention partnerships across California. “We told them that while there are such tools, none of them have been validated,” said Steele, who left government service in January 2019.



According to Capt. Martin Neideffer of the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, Steele helped shift the program away from identifying potential extremists to "providing a preventative inoculation against antisocial behavior generally." The first cohort—which included 18 Latinx, 14 black, and four white inmates—was selected based on criminogenic factors that could incline someone to violent extremism, such as a history of violent crime, antisocial behavior, and mental health issues. But the workshops avoided mentioning violent extremism and instead delivered lessons on such things as improving self-awareness and not letting fear alter one's perception of events.

The inmate who participated in the mindfulness workshop said he wouldn't have joined had he known it was DHS-funded and geared toward inmates who were judged prone to violent extremism. He said none of the workshop participants seemed at risk of radicalization. At the same time, he added, he benefited from the mindfulness training. "It helps you change to be a better person.... All inmates should take the program," he said.

Despite their controversial reputation and ambiguous results, federally funded CVE programs in the United States are not going anywhere. Another \$10 million in "targeted violence and terrorism prevention" grant funding was included in the 2020 DHS budget. Administration officials have said there will be federal support for continuing programs that the government deems successful.

"The grant programs will show us what works," said Elizabeth Neumann, the top DHS official in charge of CVE, at a [Heritage Foundation event in February 2019](#). "There's momentum to institutionalize a lot of what's been happening." The DHS has identified roughly a dozen grant-funded programs as models it would like to replicate, according to an official.

Several recipients of the 2017 grants fear that this administration could tarnish CVE. "The Trump administration has shown itself to be very biased toward Muslims, immigrants, and people of color, and I have very little trust that their institutionalization of otherwise good work would be true to the intentions of what was developed," said Junaid Afeef, an attorney who was awarded his CVE grant while working at an Illinois criminal justice agency.

Unlike the programs in Boston, Minnesota, and Oakland, Afeef's project avoided targeting minority communities from the outset. He received \$187,877 to develop a public training curriculum for intervening with "individuals who exhibit warning signs of radicalization to violence," regardless of ideology. The curriculum his agency produced explicitly discouraged considering race or religion when assessing signs of radicalization; it concentrated instead on behaviors that could signal "imminent danger," including expressions of hopelessness and severe agitation. The curriculum was tested once before the grant ran out.

But for some in Illinois's Muslim community, the grant represented a wasted opportunity to combat violent extremism effectively. According to Shabbir Patel, the security director at one of two mosques listed in Afeef's application that later dissociated themselves from the project, he agreed to partner with Afeef because he thought the project would help protect his mosque against threats like [the armed, intoxicated white man](#) who entered the building during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in 2019 claiming to be an undercover cop. (Afeef said that he was clear with Patel about what the grant would fund and that he could not figure out how Patel misunderstood.)

Patel said he expected the grant to cover security improvements like bulletproof windows and alarm systems. When he realized it would instead fund a training course on identifying and intervening with people who exhibit warning signs of radicalization, he pulled out. “We needed actual things that cost money, not some person with a PhD coming in and telling us, ‘Watch this guy, watch that guy,’” he said. “Our community doesn’t need more paranoia.”

But that paranoia seems unlikely to dissipate. As long as marginalized minorities are the targets of counterextremism programs, their mistrust of the government will persist. And as long as they mistrust the government, the authorities will continue to see in them the potential for violent extremism.