

The author(s) shown below used Federal funds provided by the U.S. Department of Justice and prepared the following final report:

**Document Title: The Challenge and Promise of Using
Community Policing Strategies to Prevent
Violent Extremism: A Call for Community
Partnerships with Law Enforcement to Enhance
Public Safety, Final Report**

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Document No.: 249674

Date Received: January 2016

Award Number: 2012-ZA-BX-0002

This report has not been published by the U.S. Department of Justice. To provide better customer service, NCJRS has made this federally funded grant report available electronically.

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THE CHALLENGE AND PROMISE OF USING COMMUNITY POLICING STRATEGIES TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A Call for Community Partnerships with
Law Enforcement to Enhance Public Safety

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JANUARY 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than four years ago, the White House issued a national strategy calling for the development of partnerships between police and communities to counter violent extremism. This report contains the results of a comprehensive assessment of the challenges and promise of this strategic approach to preventing violent extremism. It is based on a nationwide survey of law enforcement agencies and hundreds of hours of interviews and site visits with police departments and community members around the country.

Based on this research, we reached two fundamental conclusions. First, policing agencies face multiple obstacles to creating community partnerships focused on preventing acts of violent extremism. But, second, some policing agencies are following a set of promising practices which, if applied effectively, can result in increasing trust between the police and the communities they serve. These trusting relationships can serve as a platform for addressing many public safety threats, including, but not limited to, violent extremism.

The Challenge

Policing agencies are unlikely to be successful in creating partnerships to address violent extremism until they establish trusting relationships with the communities they serve.

This is especially true with respect to Muslim American communities, which have experienced significant trauma since 9/11 and have deep concerns about how they are treated by the government. Police outreach and engagement efforts are viewed with some suspicion by Muslim Americans for a number of reasons.

First, Muslim Americans perceive they are being unfairly assigned a collective responsibility to attempt to curb violent extremism inspired by al Qaeda, ISIS, and other likeminded groups, but other communities are not being asked to address anti-government, racist, and other forms of extremism. Our research confirmed that while many policing agencies have robust efforts to conduct outreach with Muslim Americans, they do not have organized, overt efforts to reach out to non-Muslim communities that may be targeted for recruitment by anti-government, racist, or other extremist movements.

Second, some Muslim Americans believe that policing outreach and engagement initiatives may be linked with efforts to conduct surveillance on Muslim American individuals and organizations.

Third, even though most Muslim Americans have favorable impressions of local law enforcement, they see outreach and engagement efforts as part of a federal counter-terrorism program. Their unpleasant experiences with federal agencies, especially with respect to airport security and immigration control, taint their support for partnerships with policing agencies.

