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POLICY PERSPECTIVE: PREVENTING DOMESTIC TERRORISM ACT

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Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL)

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Background & Research

Targeted violence is seemingly everywhere in America: Health Care executives are [assassinated](#) in New York City, cars are [rammed](#) into crowds in New Orleans, school children are [shot](#) during Mass in Minnesota, car bombs [explode](#) in California.¹ The frequency of attacks can lead to a rhetorical normalization of violence, the thinking that such attacks, “may have been all but [unstoppable](#).”² The opposite is true, and elected leaders and journalists need Americans to be aware that the violence, including these tragedies, can be prevented. One way to do this is by enshrining prevention into law.

These tragic attacks are *preventable* if we invest in the protective factors that address underlying crises before violence becomes “attractive”. In the same way that public health campaigns against lung cancer have prevented [millions](#) from being stricken,³ so too can establishing a host of societal protections reduce the risk of individuals turning to hate-fueled and targeted violence, precisely the kinds of acts considered to be **domestic terrorism**. These evidence-based approaches work upstream, creating protective social conditions rather than relying solely on last-minute interdiction. [Research](#) demonstrates that psychological inoculation programs, community-based prevention strategies, and interventions that address social isolation have measurable success in reducing the risk of violence, in marked contrast to expensive physical security and legal approaches that do nothing to address the underlying drivers of violence.⁴ These programs aren't theoretical; they are being implemented and evaluated across the country. In fact, New York State, where one of these attacks occurred, has made tremendous progress in the prevention of targeted violence, conducting well over 1,000 public health style interventions over the past two years. This is why it is misguided to foster apathy through the narrative that violence is inevitable and why elected officials and the media need to highlight preventative work, to help Americans realize that these attacks are preventable, and to demonstrate that we all have a role to play.

The message that prevention is possible matters because domestic terrorism is amongst one of the most serious threats facing our country today. In October 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under President Trump issued a threat assessment report declaring general domestic violent extremism as the “most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland.”⁵ The Biden administration issued a similar assessment in spring 2021,⁶ prompting the first-ever national strategy to counter domestic terrorism. This strategy highlighted the rising threat posed by a host of potential perpetrators to civilians, elected officials, and democratic institutions.⁷ Disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories play essential roles in both the motivation and outcomes of these threats. According to the Global Terrorism Database, terrorist attacks motivated by conspiracy theorists were responsible for 119 attacks in 2020⁸—a jump from 6 attacks the year before—in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Germany. Similarly, we see a clear causal link between polarization and violent extremism. In 2024, the Council on Foreign Relations categorized political polarization at the highest level of priority for worldwide conflicts.⁹ In sum, the U.S. and our allies have seen rising hate, violent extremism, and political violence fueled by propaganda, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and polarization and in a pattern of violence that has been escalating for years.¹⁰



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Violence is a clear repercussion of such widespread circulation of propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation. Between 2013 and 2021, the number of open domestic terrorism-related cases in the U.S. jumped **357% to 9,049 cases**, with the most violent incidents being committed by racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists during the same years.¹¹ **Of the 444 people killed by extremists** in the U.S. between 2013 and 2022, the significant majority of deaths were at the hands of those committed to far-right extremism and misogynist ideologies (335 deaths, or 75%).¹² and 17% with anti-government extremism.¹³ Two widely known tragedies—the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and a 2022 shooting that killed 10 people in a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo, NY—were both largely motivated by the so-called “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, a false and malicious claim that shadowy forces are conspiring to eliminate whites in the United States and abroad.¹⁴

Strategies solely focused on arresting individuals after they commit crimes have remained the standard for countering this crisis. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the Department of Homeland Security was created,¹⁵ and since then, DHS has served as the primary hub for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).¹⁶ Following 9/11, prevention efforts were limited, focusing on policies such as travel and immigration restrictions. Policies such as these put Muslims and Arabs in their crosshairs, which led to two troubling outcomes: turning entire ethnicities into targets of suspicion, and ignoring the expansion of domestic terrorism. In 2011, the Obama Administration launched its [CVE Initiative](#), which was later described in a report sponsored by the Department of Justice as “poorly structured and under-resourced.”¹⁷ With community outreach work embedded within federal agencies primarily responsible for national security, the effort suffered throughout from a lack of credibility or trust. In keeping with previous federal CVE work and reinforced by active threats to the homeland from designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) in Central Asia, Yemen and Somalia, the Obama CVE Initiative, “suffered from its virtually exclusive focus on engagement with Muslim-American communities,” and “bolstered the false stereotype that Muslim Americans were more susceptible to violent extremism than other Americans.” As it came into office, the first Trump Administration shut down this CVE Initiative, cut off all funding of prevention programming for two years, and moved away from CVE terminology.¹⁸ Ultimately during his first term, the DHS under Trump restored \$10 Million of funding for prevention, although this amount paled in comparison to enforcement and incarceration efforts. Furthermore, when traditional counterterrorism efforts successfully arrested, tried, and incarcerated individuals in the same cities that P/CVE efforts were underway, communities understandably conflated the two. Exacerbating things, the carceral system into which these people were placed did not provide off-ramps to deradicalize them; in fact, prisons can be places of profound radicalization.¹⁹ Now, the second Trump administration has effectively shuttered the DHS Center for Prevention Partnerships and Programs through reassignments²⁰ and wholesale reallocation of budgetary funds.²¹ For 20 years, and through three consecutive administrations, **the focus of federal P/CVE efforts on thwarting extremist attempts did not reduce the spread of violent extremism. Instead, this violence only grew.**²²



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There is every reason to arrest, to prosecute, and to incarcerate those who commit or plan violence based on their extremist views. **The security sector is an essential *post hoc* response to hate crimes and terrorist events. However, the decades since the Oklahoma City bombing have demonstrated that securitized solutions to extremism are not sufficient:** the number and impact of these horrific events only grows year to year. *Securitized solutions, on their own, react to the manifestations of hate: they do not prevent the spread of hate.*

A growing body of evidence shows us effective ways to intervene in pathways to violent extremism and domestic terrorism. **These approaches equip the public with tools that shore up their capacity and resilience.** Importantly, these approaches protect the right to free speech and reduce the need for security-based responses. These methods, many of which have been pioneered overseas and are now being brought to the States, focus on community-based programs that can be broadened, coordinated, and sustained by State and Federal commitments to collaboration and funding. **These methods focus on primary methods of intervention, with the goal of building resilience against polarization, radicalization, and their correlations on the individual, communal, state, and federal levels. The best of these approaches can be brought under the umbrella of a “public health” strategy to address these issues.**

Research demonstrates the value of **primary prevention efforts in countering the extremism that leads to targeted violence.**²³ Primary interventions are “broad-based, mass prevention programmes that target the general population... to build individual and communal resilience against radicalisation.”²⁴ And a growing body of research identifies that both **building resilience and establishing community-based interventions are crucial in preventing the violent forms of extremism that can lead to domestic terrorism.**²⁵ Where criminal justice approaches alone have not effectively prevented violent radicalization, public health strategies can address the root causes.²⁶ Scholars argue that **the best practice for governments is to pair law enforcement apprehension of bad actors with wide-spread primary prevention campaigns.** Such an approach allows for a combination of “social preventative and security perspectives”.²⁷

Several methods of primary prevention already have decades of data proving their effectiveness. Germany has pioneered a whole-of-society model, “proven, innovative, and in many respects exemplary” **for fostering democracy and respect while countering extremism.**²⁸ This German model builds **local centers for community engagement**, training, education, and intervention, all focused on the work of P/CVE. These German centers offer guidance and counsel to individuals and communities; the network of over 200+ such centers operating throughout Germany represents the best example of a public health, primary prevention approach to targeted violence. Community Centers inspired by the German model are currently being pioneered here in America, and their innovative work is supported by data from a recent set of case studies as “[s]olutions that utilize, combine, and empower local leader, residents, and organizations to actively mitigate existing and future political violence”.²⁹



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Another promising form of primary prevention can be seen in “prebunking” interventions. These come in the form of short educative messages, similar to public service announcements of the past. **Prebunking educates its audience about the methods of manipulation** used in extremist propaganda and the possible consequences of believing in it.³⁰ Over half a century of data shows that the prebunking method is effective, and ongoing work demonstrates that videos as short as 30-seconds can reduce viewers’ willingness to support false and harmful calls to action, undermine the credibility of those who spread these messages, and increase viewers’ emotional resistance. Cutting-edge work into the so-called “blanket of protection” effect may lead to even more scalability in this approach but require greater research before mass application.³¹

Despite the crucial importance of establishing domestic infrastructure for the prevention of targeted violence, this field of primary intervention is relatively new to the United States. Although there are studies proving the success of certain interventions,³² and many interventions are appropriately paired with evaluation tools, there is a continuing need to ensure that all projects working to diminish domestic terrorism both include evaluation techniques and are afforded adequate funding to ensure proper execution and reporting of this research.³³ Evaluating project and program efficacy is critical to any long-term success. Emerging program models need to include iterative feedback streams; they need to continually improve using constructive feedback from data analysis, community members, and all involved in decision-making. **Standardized evaluation measures should be developed for all prevention programs** and applied uniformly across the field (domestically and internationally) so that projects and programs can be adequately compared, and the most effective strategies can be identified. Such a commitment to evaluation would allow the field to live up to the call that the work can be, “grounded in existing evidence and best practices in public health.”³⁴

The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act (DTPA) was introduced in 2023 in Senate bill 1591, and is likely to be re-introduced in the 119th Congress.³⁵ The stated purpose of the bill is: “To authorize dedicated domestic terrorism offices within the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to analyze and monitor domestic terrorist activity and require the Federal Government to take steps to prevent domestic terrorism.” The proposed legislation heavily prescribes the first two aspects of this work: the creation of a dedicated federal office, and the specifics of the work in which it is to engage. However, most of that work involves *post hoc* law enforcement reactions to domestic terrorism: “monitoring and analyzing” extremist activity; “prosecuting events” of domestic terrorism; reporting on incidents, threats, recoveries of weapons, and the like. The most upstream preventative effort in this legislation are its stipulations for the training of law enforcement officials. Despite the titular focus on “Prevention”, **there is little in this bill that would create appropriate avenues and funding for primary prevention work.** The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act provides important safeguards against the documented threat of domestic terrorism. We at PERIL, who pursue a public health approach to matters of preventing violent extremism, encourage the expansion of the bill to include, explicitly, the upstream, evidence-based, work of prevention. This could be achieved, generally, through incorporating the following principles:



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- Given the dismantling of many of the offices specifically dedicated to violence prevention generally and targeted violence prevention specifically, **building primary prevention programs for targeted violence prevention into the many existing offices** that serve different communities and populations.
- Creating a **Targeted Violence Prevention Section** within the **Department of Health and Human Services Center for Faith**, to be responsible for implementing, testing, and scaling innovative evidence-based strategies to prevent domestic terrorism. This Section shall be an official member of the **Interagency Task Force** charged with reporting.
- Ensuring all reports and analysis include an **evaluation of national and local upstream, preventative work**, including data evaluation for projects and Federal funding avenues for P/CVE work.
- Creating avenues for **federal funding for evidence-based P/CVE work** that includes adequate funds for research and evaluation.³⁶



PERIL Suggestions for DPTA

The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act provides important safeguards against the documented threat of domestic terrorism. We at PERIL, who pursue a public health approach to matters of preventing violent extremism, encourage the expansion of the bill to include, explicitly, the upstream, evidence-based, work of prevention. The suggestions below fit the proposed language of 2023's DTPA SB 1591.

Sec. 3 (a), add as #4

(4) Targeted Violence Section of the Department of Health and Human Services.—There is an authorized Targeted Violence Prevention Section with the Center for Faith of the Department of Health and Human Services, which shall be responsible for implementing, testing, and scaling innovative evidence-based strategies to prevent domestic terrorism.

Such a change would require an emendation to the precis of the bill to read:

To authorize dedicated domestic terrorism offices within the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Health and Human Services to analyze and monitor domestic terrorist activity and require the Federal Government to take steps to prevent domestic terrorism.

It would also require a revision of 3 as follows:

SEC. 3. OFFICES TO COMBAT DOMESTIC TERRORISM.

(a) AUTHORIZATION OF OFFICES TO MONITOR, ANALYZE, PREVENT, INVESTIGATE, AND PROSECUTE DOMESTIC TERRORISM.—

Sec. 3 (b) (2), add as (D)

(D) An analysis of national and local upstream, preventative work, including data evaluation for projects and Federal funding avenues for this work;



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