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Applying Community-Oriented Policing as a Method to Counter Far-Right Extremism

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Prepared under the direction of Melissa Rorie, Ph.D.
Abstract

Far-right extremism is a growing problem in the United States. Attacks by radical right organizations are increasing and represent a significant portion of all domestic terror incidents. However, current approaches to deal with far-right extremism are failing and require a different approach to address this problem. A potential solution to stymie future attacks would be to shift the way that police departments are conducting their operations. A community-oriented policing (COP) strategy would allow law enforcement to target extremists in a way that fosters positive relationships with communities as well as gain critical intelligence and insight into these radical movements. This paper develops the foundations for future research by examining a foreign COP program that could serve as a model for a U.S.-based COP program. In addition, this paper investigates the costs and benefits of shifting to a COP strategy.
Introduction

On August 12th, 2017, white supremacists, militia groups, and various other extremist organizations gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia in an attempt to unite the white nationalist movement and protest the removal of confederate statues (Thompson, Winston & Graham, 2017). It drew hundreds of counter-protestors from evangelical groups, civil rights groups and anti-fascist groups. The event turned deadly as James Fields (alleged to be aligned with white supremacist groups) rammed his vehicle into the surrounding crowd, injuring dozens of people and resulting in the death of Heather Heyer (Thompson, Winston & Graham, 2017).

Representing the largest public gathering of far-right extremists in decades, the “Unite the Right” rally was a visible representation of the size and strength of the far-right movement in the United States. The rally drew national headlines and attention to far-right extremist activities, which are on the rise across the nation (Bergen et. al, 2018; Jones, 2018; Parkin et. al, 2017). Due to its domestic nature, police departments have a vital role in combatting this trend and must find innovative ways to adapt to this growing threat. In light of this, this paper prescribes community-oriented policing (COP) as a potential strategy for police departments in their pursuit to tackle far-right extremism. For the purposes of this paper, far-right extremism encompasses movements that are rooted in white supremacist ideology (e.g. neo-Nazis), as well as anti-government sentiments (e.g. sovereign citizens) (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.).

The Rising Threat of Far-Right Extremism

Before the September 11th attacks, police departments paid minimal attention to terrorism, believing it to be a “remote possibility” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2006, p.4). However, once the attacks occurred, police departments radically redirected their focus to prioritize counter-terrorism operations in a concentrated nationwide effort to prevent future terror
attacks (Byman, 2018). They poured significant resources and expertise into upgrading intelligence capabilities, employing complex detection technologies, incorporating military-grade equipment and more (Rizer & Hartman, 2011). However, many argue that a disproportionate amount of resources has been diverted to combating international jihadi terrorism (Byman, 2018). This has been compounded by the Trump administration’s policy decisions to focus exclusively on combating Islamic extremism (Ainsley, Cooke, & Volz, 2017). These policy decisions have resulted in a substantial gap in law enforcement’s ability to combat domestic, far-right terrorism (German & Robinson, 2018).

This lack of attention on domestic terrorism is unjustified and mistaken, considering the consistent increase of domestic terror incidents. According to data compiled by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) [2017, p.5], between 2000 and 2016, there was a “sharp increase in the proportion of attacks carried out by right-wing extremists (from 6% to 35%).” This is supported by data collected from the Anti-Defamation League (2017), showing that far-right terror incidents are increasing and near peak levels (see Figure 1). Although jihadi-inspired attacks represent the largest proportion of terrorist attacks in the United States, the mere fact that far-right terrorism has been a growing trend should be a cause for concern. The evidence is clear—the number of far-right attacks have been increasing and will likely continue to increase due to a variety of factors. In particular, the growth of social media allows different organizations to coordinate and use recruits and funds in innovative ways (START 2017, Jones, 2018; Parkin et. al, 2017). Seeing that far-right extremism is a growing domestic problem, it is essential to encourage the participation of law enforcement in addressing it. Police departments must be encouraged and enabled to devote appropriate resources in response to this urgent threat.
To effectively combat far-right terrorism, law enforcement needs to undergo a reorientation surrounding police practices. Due to the overwhelming focus on combating international terrorism, police departments often have few resources (if any) to devote to combating far-right terrorism, rendering it a low priority issue (German & Robinson, 2018). The Trump administration’s decision to nullify, delay, and significantly reduce grants to combat far-right extremism compounds this imbalance (Ainsley, Cooke, & Volz, 2017); it is now far more difficult for departments to collaborate with third-party organizations (Zanona, 2017).

Furthermore, officers often lack the necessary training to identify and respond to extremism. According to investigative journalism conducted by ProPublica, very few police departments teach new recruits about hate crimes, and those that do teach them in a cursory manner (2017). However, even with few resources and time to dedicate to combating far-right extremism, a survey of 350 officers representing 175 state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies conducted by START revealed, “86 percent of respondents agree[d] or strongly agree[d] that sovereign citizens was a serious terrorist threat” (Rivinius, 2014, p.3). Comparatively, 67 percent agreed or strongly agreed that Islamic terrorist was a serious terrorism threat. This contrasts with previous survey data where police officers considered Islamic extremists to pose the greatest threat to the safety of their communities (see Figure 2). Even though resources are lacking, police departments are largely aware of the impact of far-right terrorism.

However, the media focuses predominately on international terrorism. According to an analysis of data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), terror attacks by Muslims received 3.57 times more coverage than non-Muslim terrorists (Kearns, Betus, & Lemieux, 2018). Since 9/11, the perception that Muslims are the greatest terror threat to the United States is ingrained into the American psyche (Kearns, Betus & Lemieux, 2018). Furthermore, researchers using the
GTD data argue that events that reflect stereotypes (e.g. all Muslims are terrorists) are newsworthy because they confirm pre-existing biases. This is reflected by the media’s hesitancy to label offenders like Dylann Roof domestic terrorists, out of fear of backlash from conservative observers (Reitman, 2018). The media’s heavy focus on Islamic terrorism shapes public opinion, making it harder to persuade policymakers that far-right extremism is a serious threat. These complex factors compound and have contributed to how police shape their practices, preventing action to tackle far-right extremism.

**Community-Oriented Policing as a General Policing Strategy**

In defining COP, there exists much variation between police departments, and a single definition that encapsulates it remains a challenge. Yet, the U.S. Department of Justice definition best captures the general description of COP:

Community policing focuses on crime and social disorder through the delivery of police services that includes aspects of traditional law enforcement, as well as prevention, problem-solving, community engagement, and partnerships. The community policing model balances reactive responses to calls for service with proactive problem-solving centered on the causes of crime and disorder. Community policing requires police and citizens to join together as partners in the course of both identifying and effectively addressing these issues (Fisher-Stewart, p.4, 2007)

COP involves a merger of traditional law enforcement tactics (such as foot patrols) with unconventional methods like hosting canine shows, participating in public forums with local leaders, eating at local food establishments, and generally increasing officer-to-community communication. These are typically “quality of life” improvements and may appear to be of low priority to police officers (in comparison to investigating violent crimes) but are hugely
important for community members (Kurzman et. al, 2016). There have been empirical examples to support the success of COP, evidenced by experiments conducted in Chicago and Seattle that improved the citizen’s overall quality of life, fostered positive attitudes between the police and community, and strengthened the perception that crime had decreased (Ferreira, 1996).

However, in terms of dealing with far-right extremism, the application of COP remains limited. There exists little concrete evidence that COP has been implemented as a tool to respond to far-right terrorism. A vast number of police departments have shied away from implementing COP generally, and even fewer apply such strategies in combatting far-right terrorism (Kurzman et. al, 2016). Nevertheless, the potential for COP to restore the trust of communities in police, as well as deter and prevent radical far-right extremism, exists. COP would also act as an effective way to bring parity between police efforts to combat international and domestic terrorism.

Pursuing a COP model can produce a myriad of benefits, such as effectively responding to far-right extremism (see Figure 3). Critical intelligence is gained when there is a stable relationship between the community and police (Kurzman et. al, 2016). Investigators are able to draw upon community resources and expertise to detect potential radicalization (Stohl, 2008). Additionally, interviews with former police officers report that the public is “the most effective partner a law enforcement agency has in identifying and apprehending unknown subjects” (Brown, 2007, p.246). Mutual partnerships foster respect and trust among community members and the police, most notably by ensuring that communication is open and transparent. That is necessary to empower community members to voice their concerns about issues as well as refer other members to police resources (Stohl, 2008). This would be vital in assisting victims of extremist attacks, since community members could reach out to police if a crime was committed and seek third party victim assistance programs. Even if COP fails to deter or prevent far-right
extremism, its victim-centered approach (putting the needs of the victim first) could incur the benefit of improving relations between the police and the community and bolstering the overall quality of life in that community (Ferreira, 1996). For example, far-right attacks routinely target marginalized communities; it stands to reason that a COP strategy would aid these communities in recovering from those attacks. Moreover, fostering trust between the police and the community acts as a springboard to further community goals, as well as to strengthening public safety (Fisher-Stewart, 2007).

In addition to countering domestic terrorism, applying a COP strategy could incur the ancillary benefit of strengthening other areas of counter-terrorism (Weine, Younis, & Polutnik, 2017). This is (in part) because current efforts of gathering intelligence and engaging in cooperative practices with Muslim communities are not as effective as they could be, because those communities are feeling stigmatized (Papatheodorou, 2017). Many Muslim communities feel that police are unfairly targeting them, feeding into a sense of distrust and an unwillingness to engage with police. This negatively impacts law enforcements’ ability to form partnerships with these communities and uncover critical intelligence that could aid in counter-terrorist operations. Expanding the scope of COP to cover other areas of extremism should reduce this stigmatization, demonstrating that law enforcement is committed to addressing hate crimes regardless of who commits them (Papatheodorou, 2017; Weine, Younis, & Polutnik, 2017).

Analysis of the EXIT Programme

Even though examples of COP combating far-right extremism in the U.S. are almost non-existent, there are examples of successful programs that have been conducted abroad. The most notable and widespread is the EXIT programme which should serve as a model for future U.S. COP strategies. Originating during the 1980s in Norway, the Exit Programme was a broad
community-oriented strategy developed to respond to the growing threat of Neo-Nazi and separatists’ movements (Slootman & Tille 2008). An advisory group consisting of experienced researchers, seasoned police officers, social workers, and other professionals was created to develop the program. It purposely included a diversity of perspectives to develop nuanced and deliberate strategies to tackle radicalization. This resulted in a network of different organizations involved with giving support to youth and parents involved with far-right groups as well as “developing and disseminating knowledge and methods among professionals who work with youth from violent groups” (Slootman & Tille 2008, p.158). These partnerships were intended to support police efforts in areas in which they were not familiar with, such as children’s mental health.

In terms of how police approached the program, they started by identifying at-risk youth (primarily aged fourteen) who were poorly educated, impoverished, who previously had a negative encounter with immigrants, and who are attempting to seek refuge with far-right extremist groups (Slootman & Tille 2008). These teens were classified as non-violent, having weak attachments to far-right ideology, and who are seeking guidance from father figures. In response, police officers under the Exit Programme were instructed to prevent youth from forming bonds with the extremist groups, in addition to targeting hardened adult members. This resulted in officers participating in preventive measures such as engaging in local youth clubs, hosting community forums, and forming genuine bonds with the youth and their parents. Officers were instructed not to act aggressively towards the youth, nor to use demeaning language. Instead, they were told to act in positive manner to encourage the youth to be more cognizant of their decisions, in hopes of diverting them from their current path. For example, a forty-day dialogue occurred between the police, the Neo-Nazi group Virgrid, and their children.
which resulted in an exodus of approximately sixty members. Regarding the second aspect of the Exit Programme, police were instructed to take harsh action towards any hardened adult extremists that included arresting members even for slight violations. However, officers were also asked to hold conversations, hoping to reveal to the members the consequences of their actions. This resulted in numerous far-right extremists leaving their organizations. The combination of both actions resulted in widespread success, eventually expanding the programme to Sweden and Germany (Slootman & Tille 2008). Many of these programmes have proven to be successful and are still in operation (Ramalingam, 2015).

There are a few caveats to consider in terms of whether U.S. police departments could successfully model the Norwegian Exit Programme. The first and most prominent is that Norwegian police already operate at a community level, meaning that officers already knew most of the youth personally (Slootman & Tille 2008). Police officers in the U.S. generally employ a wide variety of policing measures, such as hot-spot policing or predictive policing, but these strategies are not intended to foster and maintain stable relations with the community (NIJ, 2017). This lack of existing community relations could stymie the success of COP programs initially, due to the time it takes to start a COP program (i.e., the training and resources required to adequately develop positive relations). The second issue is that the Norwegian program involved significant coordination with a multitude of professionals and non-profit organizations that specialize in dealing with at-risk youth radicalization. Even if police departments had access to specialized third parties, many police departments may not have the sufficient resources to ramp up cooperation and investment (Patil, 2018; Venkatesh, 2012). However, these barriers are not insurmountable, as they require time and resources, typical of any new policy.
In sum, the Exit programme reveals the potential for COP success in targeting far-right extremism. It has empirically reduced the number of extremists and has created positive relations between the community and the police. The integration of police input along with evidence-based research allows COP models to be tailored to a specific department’s needs and wants. Although originating in a foreign nation, the Exit programme could, at the very least, provide key insights into how to develop a U.S. based COP programme.

**Obstacles in Using Community-Oriented Policing as a Terrorism Strategy**

There remain significant barriers to fully embracing COP as a policing strategy. First, COP is extremely resource intensive since it requires mutual participation between the police and the community (Fisher-Stewart, 2007). Encouraging partnerships necessitates event planning, redefining police procedures, and developing performance standards to ensure cooperation from officers, in addition to other tedious processes (Spalek, 2012). Hosting events, investing in the time to foster relationships, and other activities are time-consuming and could detract from other police work. Additionally, resources from local governments are often diverted from other needs to create specialized COP officers and fund projects (Fisher-Stewart, 2007). Specialized officers are one of the more common ways to approach COP, but can be expensive and might make it difficult to create consistency among officer interactions (i.e., where the same officer speaks to the same youth). Integrating COP generally (or even using specialized COP officers) could be a serious obstacle that would require time and effort to overcome – two things not easy to come by in modern police departments.

The second barrier is motivation from both the police and the community to engage in COP. The desire from police departments to embrace COP is mixed (Kurzman et.al, 2016). Reluctance stems from its time-consuming nature, along with the potential for mistakes and
misunderstanding. Policing is a stressful process, thus attempting to develop genuine relationships while remaining on guard can often feel overwhelming (Kurzman et. al, 2016). Compounding that is the ‘us vs. them’ mentality from many police departments that believe that there is an inherent divide between the police and the community (Murray, 2005). This belief encourages officers to view the community as separate from them, which creates the conditions for mutual distrust. If officers are perceived as unwilling to foster genuine relationships with the community, then partnerships will tend to fall apart, rendering COP ineffective (Fisher-Steward, 2007). On the other hand, if communities are unwilling to form partnerships then police efforts will be futile. This is true for communities that have had negative past experiences with police, particularly those that are reclusive and have a genuine distrust towards the police such as sovereign citizens (Kurzman et. al, 2016).

In addition to internal factors, there are external considerations that need to be addressed in order to proceed with COP. One consideration would be to determine the types of communities that police should focus on (i.e., those most worthy of limited time and resources). For example, communities such as sovereign citizens are inherently hostile to government agencies and rarely come into contact with police (SPLC, n.d.). These groups are typically located in exceptionally rural areas because of their extreme unwillingness to cooperate with police which also poses a risk for unnecessary escalation that could result in injury or death (Kurzman et. al, 2016). There have been numerous incidents of routine traffic stops involving sovereign citizens turning deadly (Dickson, 2014). However, as seen in Exit Programme, building relations with extremist organizations (such as radical skinheads) in a suburban neighborhood would appear to be a feasible task.
Another consideration would be to ensure that police are not perceived as being overly friendly with far-right movements. Hosting community events with people who are known racists may inflame the general public, since it could be perceived as police departments being sympathetic to or attempting to curry favor with these organizations. This would be extremely detrimental, especially given current issues involving police-community relations with minority communities (Reitman, 2018). Officers cannot afford to lose the confidence of the general public.

**Recommendations**

In order to effectively combat far-right extremism in the U.S., police departments should consider the following recommendations:

- **Selectively Incorporate Community-Oriented Policing**: Incorporating COP has been shown to be a useful way to reduce the risk of radicalization, thus preventing domestic attacks (Slootman & Tille 2008). Officers have had success using “canine shows, SWAT team demonstrations, and national night out celebrations” to persuade far-right groups to abandon their ways (Kurzman et. al, 2016, p.32). Even if officers are unable to directly form relationships with far-right extremists, they could form relationships with surrounding community members who could then give tips and inform the police of suspicious activity. However, due to limited time and resources, police departments are not likely capable of using COP as a strategy for every type of far-right extremist group. Decentralized far-right groups, with members geographically located in suburban areas, are easier to form partnerships with than extremists that are located in extremely rural areas (e.g. sovereign citizens). Additionally, it would be a waste of valuable resources
to devote time and effort to groups that are too radical to form stable partnerships with (such as the Oath Keepers, a notorious anti-government organization) (SPLC, n.d). The determination would be up to local police departments, since they could make the most accurate analysis of their surrounding communities. Regarding funding, departments could overcome this barrier if they were to seek grants from organizations such as the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Furthermore, it could be speculated that success breeds success, therefore if a program was shown to be effective in combating far-right terrorism or in restoring community relations even partially, it could prove to be an impetus for the government to devote more resources to COP there and elsewhere.

- **Create Motivational Opportunities for Officers:** As identified earlier, one barrier to the implementation of COP programs can be a lack of motivation on behalf of police officers to foster relations with the community and participate in events (Kurzman et. al, 2016). Therefore, to foster an environment where officers want to implement COP, police departments ought to find ways to incentivize officer participation. Police officers who choose to engage in community events should be rewarded with stipends, promotions, and/or other benefits. Furthermore, empirical studies have shown that officers engaged in COP are more satisfied with their jobs than officers engaged in crime-controlled policing (Halsted, Bromley, Cochran, 2000; Green, 1989). Therefore, even if officers are initially hesitant to engage in COP, as time passes they will be more likely to appreciate the work that they are doing and thus will support initiatives to foster relations with the community.
• **Develop Specialized Training and Awareness Curriculums:** Consistent throughout the literature has been an emphasis on utilizing training and awareness programs to facilitate effective communication between police and the community. Training programs must be clear, concise, unbiased, non-ideological, and based on empirical evidence. This is to ensure that officers are retaining information and also to avoid making officers feel like their personal beliefs are being attacked, which is especially true for regions such as the South where officers have a greater tendency to reject applying the terrorism label to certain extremist groups, particularly radical anti-abortionists (Kurzman et. al, 2016). Thus, it is vital to train officers to separate any sympathy with the terrorist organization’s beliefs from the organization’s commission of actual criminal acts (Chermak, Freilich, & Shemtob, 2009). Resources are available from the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center that could help in developing programs.

• **Upgrade and Monitor Intelligence Capabilities:** As a prerequisite to effective COP, police departments must have sufficient intelligence to identify who lives in what communities (Kurzman et. al, 2016). If a police officer cannot identify a community member (and whether or not they belong to a far-right organization), then how can they deter or prevent far-right extremism from occurring? Thus, departments should make a greater effort to track and record members of extremist groups, including working with researchers and other government agencies to coordinate data. This could include simple observations such as noticing the terminology used by a community member (e.g. the use of the phrase
“sovereign citizen”) as well as viewing signs and bumper stickers that could indicate ideology. Departments could incorporate the use of informants, a strategy that has shown to be effective in some situations, such as the arrests of the Washington State Militia in the 1990s (Chermak, Freilich, & Shemtob, 2009). Departments should also use informal word of mouth to identify relationships in the community.

Alternatives to Community-Oriented Policing

As with any policy problem, there are a variety of different methods to solve the issue. For example, some experts have argued that current laws are insufficient to deal with domestic terrorism, and instead new laws need to be created (McCord, 2018). This could be in the form of a statute directly criminalizing domestic terrorism, yet there already exists a robust legal framework that can be employed. Furthermore, the creation of such a statute could undermine civil liberties and adversely target nonviolent protestors (German and Robinson, 2018); there is evidence that federal law enforcement officers target left-leaning activists such as environmentalists protesting the construction of new pipelines or political protesters that argue for an end to police brutality (German, 2018).

Another option would be for police to adopt a more aggressive approach, similar to “zero tolerance” policing that seeks to crack down on far-right extremists. However, such an approach has previously resulted in backlash that emboldened far-right groups (Reitman, 2018). For example, former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano developed a comprehensive report in partnership with the FBI, detailing the growing threat from far-right

1 Prosecutors do not charge suspected terrorists with the crime “domestic terrorism” but rather employ a variety of different laws that target the method and motive. This could include conspiracy to commit murder, murder, racketeering, the unlawful possession of a firearm, hate crime laws and more (German, 2018).
extremism (Reitman, 2018). Unfortunately, that document was leaked to conservative radio hosts and anti-government organizations, who encouraged a rally of support from far-right groups, arguing that the government was plotting against conservatives. In addition, it is highly possible that aggressive policing toward extremist factions would result in negative counteractions that could incur more police deaths. There have been multiple documented incidents of routine traffic stops turning violent due to sovereign citizens rejecting police legitimacy (Dickson, 2014).

Encouraging police to conduct aggressive policing in routine situations such as these could incite further violence. Furthermore, aggressive tactics would likely involve SWAT units and other forms of militarized policing. This is problematic, as there is evidence that militarized policing not only fails to reduce crime or provide increased safety, it incurs negative reactions from the public (Mummol, 2018). Observing military-like police vehicles in local neighborhoods gives the perception of an authoritarian police presence, diminishing community-police relations.

**Conclusion**

This paper provides a foundation for future COP researchers to use, but there remains much more to learn about COP’s role in combatting domestic terrorism. Future research could expand upon the intricacies of developing a counter-terrorism specific COP program, perhaps in collaboration with a specific police department (e.g., New York City’s Police Department, which has implemented multiple efforts that could be considered part of a COP strategy) (NYPD, n.d.). As discussed, COP could allow police departments to start focusing on the root causes of extremism while avoiding other alternatives that would produce more harm than good. From Charlottesville to the more recent Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, far-right terror attacks are growing. Action must be taken, and COP could be effective in diverting at-risk youth from being recruited as well as intervening to prevent adult members from committing future crimes. Even if
COP fails as a preventative strategy, it would at least be a step forward in remedying to the current distrust that exists between police and the community (Papatheodorou, 2017).
Appendix

Figure 1. Far-Right Terror Incidents in the United States (1993-2016)

Source: Anti-Defamation League (2017). This data consisted of acts, attempted acts, plots of deadly terrorist incidents (i.e., incidents where someone was injured or killed), and non-deadly terror incidents over a 23-year period.
Figure 2. Police Perceptions of Terrorist Threats

Source: START (2017). This survey consisted of 350 officers representing 175 state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies and compared the results from a 2006-2007 survey to a 2013-2014 survey (both conducted by START). The left axis represents a mean score of a 4-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree) and the (rank order) of officer concerns (Rivinius, 2014).
Figure 3. The potential benefits of a community-oriented policing strategy geared towards combating far-right extremism
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