In 2014, as a speaker at a countering violent extremism conference, I had to pull the organizers aside for an awkward conversation about a post to my Twitter account. Just before I was about to present, a supporter of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) had publicly tweeted at me: “Kill them, you have their trust.” His logic was simple: The conference would be the perfect opportunity to engage in mass murder because no one would see it coming. He knew that the conference included a number of people who, like me, work daily to push back against the extremist propaganda circulated online by people like him.

Such incidents—witnessing people targeting and recruiting others to engage in violent activities or issuing threats on social media—are not uncommon to those who work in my field. On Saturday, another shooting took place, but this time in Copenhagen. On Jan 7, 2015, days after the attack in Paris on Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical newspaper, an ISIS supporter had proclaimed on Twitter, “Our prophet isn’t a joke. Insha allaah next time we will hit Denmark #CharlieHebdo.” The tweet was quickly taken down, but the question still lingers: What is being done to counter violent extremism?

There is a lot of talk about countering violent extremism: It has been on the forefront of the U.S. domestic counterterrorism agenda for many years and the White House will meet from February 17-19 for a summit on the topic. But, like terrorism, the term has no universally accepted definition despite the fact that it is included in policy directives across the world and in the UN Security Council Resolution 2178 condemning violent extremism. In 2011 and 2013, Washington issued a number of policy guidelines on possible strategies but to date has not provided a single definition. I define “countering violent extremism” as: “the use of non-coercive means to dissuade individuals or groups from mobilizing towards violence and to mitigate recruitment, support, facilitation or engagement in ideologically motivated terrorism by non-state actors in furtherance of political objectives.”

This “means” can typically be broken down into four intersecting parts: preventing radicalization, intervening on behalf of individuals who have radicalized, interdicting or finding and prosecuting those who have engaged in criminal behavior, and reintegrating into society those offenders who are in prison, have served their term, or are returning from conflict zones.

Globally, there are hundreds of counter extremism programs. In many countries, practitioners focus on strengthening communities to reduce their vulnerability towards radicalization. The White House strategy, for example, emphasizes prevention and interdiction. But there are very few countries that have programs addressing all four aspects—especially intervention and reintegration. As a result of this gap, individuals who have begun to radicalize are not turned around and those who have acted violently are not rehabilitated.

BUILDING TRUST

When it comes to prevention and intervention, many U.S. government agencies consider community engagement to be synonymous with countering violent extremism, to the exclusion of other programming. This narrow understanding of countering violent extremism assumes that if all at-risk people had a better relationship with the government, they would be less inclined to commit acts of terrorism.

Further, despite the breadth and depth of all the guidelines on how to engage a community, implementation across the nation is uneven at best. Because the U.S. Attorney General’s offices were given the task of spearheading efforts to counter violent extremism, many of them were reluctant to engage with the community, since their primary experience beforehand had been with respect to prosecutions. Several such officials considered one-time meetings with a small subset of community leaders every few years to be sufficient to check community engagement off their
to-do lists. I recall that one attorney general’s office that I met with in 2014 had delayed directly meeting with community leaders for nine months despite repeated requests. The meeting did eventually happen; but it was one of only three in the past three years.

Even when meetings happen regularly, there is the question of whether such conversations are effective. Government agencies seem to think so, but sometimes such engagement only makes communities feel targeted. If an environment of trust does not exist already, it needs to be cultivated before sensitive topics like radicalization can be discussed. However, building trust with communities by talking to only (sometimes self-proclaimed) community leaders is not enough. Those who have been willing to speak with government agencies do not usually represent the people that would be considered “at-high risk.” The communities that are least inclined to engage are often the ones that need the outreach the most.

NO SILVER BULLET

Another aspect of countering violent extremism is community policing, which involves establishing partnerships with neighborhoods to involve them in problem solving to enhance public safety. This technique was once heralded as a silver bullet. But, in practice, there is no consistent understanding or implementation of such a strategy across the country.

Many police departments consider community policing as an avenue for finding informants to help detect rather than prevent criminal activity. As the responsibility for counterterrorism has shifted (or is now being shared) from the federal level to the local levels, local law enforcement officials have been encouraged to gather intelligence, which only undermines the initiatives aimed at fostering community trust. Meanwhile, federal law enforcement, which conducts most of the country’s terrorism investigations, is often the outfit least trusted by communities precisely because of how it collects information.

Community policing also incorrectly assumes that geographically defined and connected communities exist. In large urban areas, neighbors do not always know one another, and there are also no clear guidelines on what constitutes suspicious activity under the “See Something, Say Something” campaigns.

To establish a sound relationship between prevention, law enforcement, and the community, leadership and community outreach units at some of the larger FBI field offices need to be reformed. For example, some field offices frequently reassign their staff, resulting in new faces nearly every two years. By the time the field officers have fostered ties with the community, it is time for them to take on a different role. In addition, community outreach is still one-sided: It depends on whether the leadership at the local field office has made community engagement a priority. Essentially, there is an uneven relationship in which one side calls all the shots regarding the frequency and nature of interactions with the community. Finally, there are no incentives to engage in counter-violent extremist activities since more often than not, an agent is rewarded for catching a terrorist rather than for preventing and dissuading someone from becoming one. This too must change. But it requires extensive training and attitude shifts across law enforcement agencies.

COUNTER-MESSAGING

One of the cornerstones of countering violent extremism is the use of public communication tools to dissuade its supporters. In 2011, the State Department established a Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications that uses Twitter accounts such as @ThinkAgain_DOS to send anti-extremism messages. One of its most recent tweets was, “30K marchers supported Niger campaign against Boko Haram; 160 suspects arrested over 2 days.”

But, as the @ThinkAgain DOS tweet shows, the government’s attempt at counter-messaging is not really sufficient. These accounts have limited dialogue and can legally only target accounts from outside the country. Counter-extremism narratives must address the political grievances wrapped in ideological language, some of which are legitimate even if others might not be. An ISIS supporter recently tweeted, “#IS star recruiters are injustice and
oppression,” during an exchange with me about what attracts the youth to terrorism. The objective of counter-extremism messaging should be to dissuade people from supporting violence, not to defend policy choices made by lawmakers and politicians. This messaging is best done by non-government actors, but they are unfortunately few and far between.

Meanwhile, the voices behind those messages need to be diverse and they need to be amplified. They need to be running active campaigns to disrupt extremism narratives and provide resonant alternatives. And they need to be tagging offensive recruitment content for removal. Needless to say, social media platforms provide the most uncontested space for extremism recruiters. In the fall of 2014, ISIS supporters controlled 45,000 Twitter accounts. Since then, Twitter has been aggressively suspending accounts (close to 19,000 by some estimates) and Anonymous recently launched Operation ISIS and has shut down up to 1,500 Twitter and Facebook accounts. Such activities will go much farther than a tweet recounting the latest news on Boko Haram.

A LEGAL GRAY ZONE

Whereas prevention programs are most effective when implemented by a trusted member of civil society, interdiction of terrorist plots falls under law enforcement mandates. But this area of counter-extremism is a new and uncomfortable gray zone. For example, on one occasion in 2013, I witnessed the public recruitment and grooming of a teenager by al Qaeda over Twitter. Over the course of two years, that individual went from an activist championing minority rights to supporting Jabhat al Nusra (al Qaeda in Syria), and in a final shift of allegiance became one of the largest distributors of ISIS propaganda. He is now currently in Syria. Reporting the case to law enforcement within the first few months of when I first noticed this happening did not get a response. Another incident, also involving a teenager who was targeted by terrorist recruiters, again garnered no action from the authorities. One and half years later, law enforcement is dealing with a radicalized juvenile who has recruited at least two others and has helped one travel to Syria.

In my discussions with law enforcement officials, they openly voiced their frustration that if someone has not committed a crime, there is little they can legally do beforehand to dissuade an individual from joining an extremist group. Indefinite surveillance and undercover operations do nothing to pull a person away from the brink of extremism, and yet those are the few tools at the disposal of law enforcement agencies. Social and spiritual counseling can be a viable option but few communities have counselors trained in methods to psychologically extract youth from terrorist groups.

Although a few FBI field offices across the country are piloting intervention programs that include counseling by civil society actors, these are few and far between. If the intervention fails, there would be little legal protection and moreover, there is much unwelcome media attention for all parties involved. There is a growing need to formalize public–private partnerships and build intervention teams where psychologists, social workers, educators, counselors, clergy, and families can be assembled to create strategies for dealing with individual cases.

Fortunately, the United States can take lessons from intervention and rehabilitation programs such as Channel in the United Kingdom and Hayat in Germany, which is modeled after its EXIT program for right wing extremists. There are also new ones being introduced in several European countries and Canada. Over the long term, as a police chief from a major North American metropolitan area told me, hiring full-time intervention teams is cheaper than running indefinite surveillance and investigations and a more cost-effective way of spending tax dollars.

Furthermore, some 40 countries—ranging from Denmark, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—all offer de-radicalization programs for those who have already committed extremist violence. Without such structured rehabilitation efforts, the likelihood that younger prisoners will harden during their sentences is high, as we recently saw in the Charlie Hebdo and Copenhagen cases. Cherif Kouachi was exposed to al Qaeda operatives while in jail, after which one or both of the brothers went to Yemen for training with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Imprisoning convicted violent extremists without rehabilitation is an incomplete solution; it is merely deferring a
problem that will worsen over time. Although rehabilitation programs are resource intensive—and there is of course no guarantee of a perfect success rate for such programs—the consequences of failing to do anything are huge as younger and younger people become radicalized, commit crimes, and are sent to jail.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

One of the questions practitioners often get asked is why the community does not step up and do something about violent extremism.

The biggest problem is a lack of funding for the programs that focus on prevention and intervention. Although U.S. federal government funding is available for law enforcement training and countering violent extremism research, there are no grants available for community-led programs. State and local governments have some funds for prevention programs, but they are very limited. Foundations are loath to step outside their missions and support countering violent extremism programs since they traditionally fall under the purview of counterterrorism. At a government-convened forum that included a handful of trusted practitioners, some of the largest philanthropic organizations responded with an categorical “No” when asked to give money. Some large corporations are starting to provide training and access to their services and facilities, but no one is willing to run or sponsor initiatives yet.

To highlight the scale of the resources needed (and that are not available), let us look at what is involved in implementing one of the more straightforward counter-violent extremism programs: workshops to raise awareness of violent extremism and online radicalization and help families intervene. Covering even a fraction of at-risk communities would take tens of thousands of workshops per year. To be effective, people need to hear the message more than once. To truly confront violent extremism and prevent extremist groups from preying on at-risk youth, tens of thousands workshops need the requisite funding. They cannot be run as free or voluntary services. Expecting members of a specific faith community to become experts in radicalization and violent extremism so they can effectively do extremism prevention training is naive and impractical.