Preventing and Assessing Rural Threats for First Responders

Final Programmatic / Close-Out Report

Begun Center for Violence Prevention
Research and Education
Case Western Reserve University

1. Project Overview

The Preventing and Assessing Rural Threats for First Responders (PART) project aimed to enhance the identification, mitigation, and reporting of violent extremism threats in the rural areas of Northeast Ohio. The project's overarching goal was to equip public safety personnel, including law enforcement, emergency medical services/fire, and emergency management officials, with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively address these threats.

The initial target population of the project included public safety personnel in Ashtabula, Geauga, and Lake Counties, Ohio. The primary focus of the program was to train County Sheriff Department personnel, as they are the frontline responders and law enforcement authorities within these counties.

The first project goal was to ensure that rural public safety personnel possessed comprehensive skills in identifying and preventing violent extremism. To achieve this, the PART Team, PART Advisory Board, and Northeast Ohio Regional Fusion Center (NEORFC) collaborated to create relevant training content for this target audience. The training was initially going to take place with several large groups of trainees, but ultimately was provided through an online format.

To accomplish the first goal, a series of activities took place including conducting advisory board meetings, performing a needs assessment for rural counties in Northeast Ohio, developing a comprehensive training curriculum, and refining the curriculum based on feedback from stakeholders. The training curriculum covers topics such as Fusion Center capabilities, activities leading up to an attack, and current threat groups across the United States.

The second project goal focused on enhancing collaboration, information sharing, and reporting across rural communities in Northeast Ohio. To achieve this, the NEORFC and PART Team provided threat assessment and reporting overviews in the training material. The objective was to increase awareness of the NEORFCs support capabilities to public safety partners and improve the utilization of reporting and information sharing across the region. Through this training, the NEORFC hoped to improve its awareness of events, potential threats, and critical assets within its area of responsibility.

The activities associated with the second goal involved a) conducting research on current threat assessment models, b) developing a scalable threat assessment, c) highlighting suspicious activity reporting tools and training public safety personnel on their use, and d) educating personnel on NEORFC capabilities that supported law enforcement activities, investigations, and events.

2. Key Accomplishments and Outcomes

Throughout the PART project, various milestones were accomplished, leading to the successful development of an online training program that, although significantly impacted by COVID-19, is now available to the target population and being distributed further through an additional TVTP-funded project.

The initiative began by establishing roles and responsibilities among the PART Team, PART Advisory Board, and Northeast Ohio Regional Fusion Center (NEORFC). This ensured effective coordination and collaboration throughout the project's implementation.

To solidify program objectives, the team conducted research and analysis to identify local violent extremism threats, trends, and historical data specific to rural communities. We utilized several key publicly available resources that helped to inform what has historically been reported in rural Ohio communities, and what groups may have a current presence or strong influence in these areas. Databases such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Profiles of Individuals Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS), the Terrorism and Extremist Violence in the United States (TEVUS) Database and Portal, and the FBI Crime Data Explorer (FBI CDE) were all utilized, downloading data when needed, and performing extensive exploratory analysis. The PART team ultimately settled on five training topics (six training modules), broader in scope than initially planned in that the final training curriculum included a) threat groups with a current national presence, and b) incorporated a review of both left- and right-wing groups.

As the online training production phase commenced, the team incorporated feedback received from several internal and external reviews, including draft reviews by DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3). This iterative process aimed to improve the training and ensure its relevance and effectiveness. Although the training development took far longer than anticipated, the modules and resources were successfully produced and made available through a) direct access through REDCap, and b) through a publicly accessible website. [1]

Moreover, the project's shift to an online training delivery has allowed us to potentially impact communities far beyond the initial target counties, as the threat assessment, threat group overview, and reporting processes can be disseminated to anyone, although we have yet to publicize the training outside of our target areas as of June 2023.

PART Training Modules

Course Introduction. Introduces categories of extremism, the persistent threat to law enforcement personnel, and key terms related to radicalization and violent extremism.

Module 1 – Events Leading to an Attack. Focuses on the sequence of events in planning and conducting a violent attack, emphasizing the importance of familiarizing oneself with specific precursor activities, timelines, and indicators to better identify and potentially disrupt the planning cycle and individuals involved.

Module 2 – Threat Assessment. Highlights the purpose of performing a threat assessment, familiarizes individuals with the process, and explores observable indicators of radicalization, emphasizing the importance of intervention and support to prevent acts of violence.

Module 3 (two parts) – Threat Groups. Overview of domestic extremist threat groups, providing information on ideological motivations, aiming to increase general knowledge of extremism in the United States.

Module 4 – Fusion Centers & Suspicious Activity Reporting. Overview of fusion centers in the United States, their role in supporting law enforcement through information sharing, suspicious activity reporting, and the importance of protecting privacy and civil rights.

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[1] The Google site (https://sites.google.com/case.edu/driversxviolentextremism/home) may not be accessible to federal agencies due to internet security/restrictions. However, local law enforcement have not reported issues with accessing this page.

The training rollout began on February 2ⁿᵈ, 2023. From February until the end of the grant period for the PART program (31 March 2023), YouTube analytics shows there were 181 total views across both the target audience *and* external audience versions of the training modules. As of June 2023, the DRIVERS project (the PART follow-on grant) reported that 36 police or sheriff departments from across the Northeast Ohio area have had personnel participate in at least one module of the training. More than **90% of training survey respondents self-reported knowledge increases** across all the training modules. Further, of 49 survey respondents who took the training, just over 95% stated that they believed they would apply knowledge gained from the training at least once a year or more. From the beginning of the training roll-out through early June 2023, there were 380 views of the modules by personnel in the target population and the analytics software shows that trainees are viewing more than 90% of the content across all modules of training. An encouraging datapoint is that trainees viewed 98.1% of module 1, which describes the preparatory activities that take place before an attack. We believe this module is the most practical and applicable part of our training and appears to be the module which is most engaging to our target audience.

3. Deliverables

Table 1. Deliverables

Deliverable	URL / Link	Description
External training website. Final version. This link can be shared outside of DHS.	https://sites.google.com/case.edu /driversxviolentextremism/home	Public-facing training page that links participants directly to the YouTube training content.
PART and DRIVERS resources. Final version. This link can be shared outside of DHS.	https://sites.google.com/case.edu /driversxviolentextremism/resourc es?authuser=0	This page houses additional resources that include: • National and State Threat Assessment and Management Resources. • Government and Public Safety Resources including DHS CP3 content and links. • Violent Extremism Research and Analysis Resources including key databases and analysis/publications used in the development of the training.
Narrative scripts and sources used in the training. Final version. This link can be shared outside of DHS.	https://sites.google.com/case.edu /driversxviolentextremism/resourc es?authuser=0	Included on the resources page of the website are individual scripts for the PART training. These scripts are available primarily to point interested parties to the source material used to develop the narrative of the training modules.
Scalable Threat Assessment	n/a	This deliverable transitioned to the DRIVERS grant/project for completion and is in development.

4. Challenges and Lessons Learned

4.a. Challenges encountered, and lessons learned.

The primary challenge arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, our project proposal was based on modifying DHS Law Enforcement Awareness Briefing (LAB) by focusing our version of that training on threat groups and activities more relevant to rural communities, rather than foreign terrorist organizations. Our plan was to conduct in-person training sessions with a total target audience of 400 individuals over the grant period. We had commitment from the three target counties, specifically the three Sheriff Departments, that their personnel would attend the event(s).

However, COVID-19 in-person gathering restrictions forced us to consider other options to deliver the training. In collaboration with the advisory board, which included the Sheriffs from the target counties, we decided to create a course that would be delivered online. This shift in delivery method proved to be more complex than anticipated, as it required many additional steps, research, and coordination (e.g., HSIN) to create high-quality content suitable for our target audience. Staffing shortages experienced at the Begun Center, likely caused, or exacerbated by the pandemic, also resulted in delaying the training development.

4.b. What would we do differently?

If we were to plan and implement the project again, we believe that following through with targeted in-person training with key individuals in each department may have been a more effective way to introduce the training, at least in terms of reaching our target audience. Although the online format was necessitated by the pandemic, to get participation from public safety personnel in our target counties, prioritizing a series of in person training sessions for select supervisory staff from the agencies on the Advisory Board might have been an effective initial strategy for engagement and training dissemination.

As we were well into our training development, we learned that Ohio government agencies began working on a similar web-based training specific to violent extremism. Additionally, toward the end of our training development, similar training programs were developed through DHS and through other TVTP-funded groups.[2,3]   Although providing multiple training opportunities is useful, ensuring standardization of language and content across these various training programs would benefit all parties and participants. Additionally, in Ohio, law enforcement officers are obligated to complete a certain number of hours of online training to meet state-mandated requirements. Because our training is entirely voluntary and does not count towards the required training hours for law enforcement personnel, it would be beneficial to collaborate with some of these groups who have developed this training and incorporate a version of this training into the mandatory peace officer training curriculum; this would ensure participation and broad dissemination. [4]

5. Sustainability

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[2] ICSVE is offering "Police Responses to Terrorism and Violent Extremism" multi-media training series which are six modules delivered virtually in two-hour sessions (https://www.icsve.org/), and DHS, in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Justice and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, released an eLearning module called "Foundations of Targeted Violence Prevention" to educate the public on recognizing and reporting threatening behaviors as a means to prevent targeted violence and ensure community safety (https://www.dhs.gov/foundations-targeted-violence-prevention).

[3] DHS, in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Justice and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, released an eLearning module called "Foundations of Targeted Violence Prevention" to educate the public on recognizing and reporting threatening behaviors as a means to prevent targeted violence and ensure community safety (https://www.dhs.gov/foundations-targeted-violence-prevention).

[4] The Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy offers online training that includes training around school threat assessment. There may be opportunity to incorporate training that focuses on threat assessment outside of the school setting (i.e., PART/DRIVERS) to this web-based, mandatory training for Ohio law enforcement personnel (https://opotaonline.inquisiqlms.com/Catalog/V2/).

Fortunately for the PART project, our team received additional grant funding to continue pushing out the training to additional first responder agencies across Northeast Ohio. Although this follow-on grant (DRIVERS) will not provide long-term sustainability, it was critical in terms of helping satisfy the objectives of the PART grant and PART is essentially "sustained" an additional year because of the work occurring through the DRIVERS project.

Additionally, because the training is available online, longer-term sustainability is possible, and we have no plans to take down the PART/DRIVERS website nor do we plan to remove the training content/videos from YouTube. However, at some point the training material, specifically information regarding threat groups, should be updated. The other content should only require minimal updates as reporting procedures, threat assessment considerations, and the research we utilized to develop indications and warnings of attacks should remain relevant.

6. Contributions to the Field

While we recognize the rapid expansion of threat assessment in schools as a response to the ever-increasing levels of school violence and mass shootings executed by youth, our training program addresses an area that has received little attention and community-level consideration by focusing on what we feel is an overlooked aspect of violent extremism among adults. By targeting threats of violent extremism in rural America and extending beyond the school setting, our training aimed to initiate discussions on how communities can effectively respond to and support individuals displaying signs of violence driven by divisive and hateful ideologies. Our training helps highlight the need for a collaborative approach to addressing violent extremism, one that involves local law enforcement but ultimately requires community-wide investment and expanding threat assessment models beyond schools to encompass the entire population.

7. Contact Information

Begun Center for Violence Prevention
Research and Education
Mailing Address:
10900 Euclid Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44106-7164
Phone: 216.368.4951
Email: begun@case.edu