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## Family Responses to White Supremacist Extremism: Report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

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# **Family Responses to White Supremacist Extremism**

*Report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security*

June 2021



**NCITE** NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM,  
INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY,  
AND EDUCATION CENTER

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## **About this Report**

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## **About NCITE**

This new Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence is an academic hub based at the University of Nebraska Omaha focused on bolstering counterterrorism efforts and terrorism and targeted violence prevention. We are 50-plus academics at 18 universities in the U.S. and U.K. working on 16 research projects. The projects will result in innovation, technology, and education for today's counterterrorism workforce and inspire the workforce of the future.

## **Citations**

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## **Executive Overview:**

- Families often express some form of disapproval to relatives involved in white supremacist extremism (WSE);
- Expressions of disapproval are often limited to “staying out of trouble” or involve limited to no clearly defined intervention;
- Families fear “closing doors” will increase the likelihood they will push their relative away;
- Families rarely seek out formal assistance from either governmental or non-governmental agencies;
- While nearly 34% of the sample received counseling during childhood and/or adolescence, none of those counseling sessions addressed WSE; the counseling focused exclusively on non-WSE issues (e.g., academic failure, generic delinquency, etc.).

## **Introduction**

Terrorism prevention relies on the general public's reporting of suspicious activity. As part of NCITE's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Center of Excellence award under the Theme 3: Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR), our team is studying how families respond to radicalization among one of their relatives. The project is focused on how relatives interpret potential "warning signs" and what, if any, action relatives pursue to address perceived radicalization. In particular, we assess whether relatives contact any governmental or non-governmental authorities.

In turn, this study has relevance to the Department of Homeland Security and the whole of society approach in terms of helping understand reporting behavior among those closest to the radicalization process: family members of those who radicalize toward extremism.

Understanding the reporting behaviors of family members can provide important insight for how to develop outreach efforts to improve public trust so that those closest to radicalization feel comfortable providing information about any concerns or suspicions. In terms of establishing healthier and safer communities, it is vital to help families identify potential "warning signs" and increase their awareness of extremist recruitment strategies. Part of this endeavor also includes raising awareness about potential non-governmental resources that can help address radicalization before it occurs or early in the process before anyone is harmed.

As part of year 1, we conducted a needs assessment of SARs by interviewing key DHS stakeholders about explicit efforts to focus on the role of families as it relates to reporting suspicious activity. The research design for this project relies primarily on life history interviews with family members, however, we also capitalize on an additional source of existing data that involved interviews with former white supremacist extremists (WSE) (DeMichele, Blee, and

Simi, 2015). As part of that existing dataset, 91 in-depth interviews with formers were conducted between 2012-2019 across the U.S. and Canada. The life history interviews are data rich and include thick descriptions of the person's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Part of those descriptions included how their relatives responded at the time to their radicalization and eventual extremist involvement. In the following sections, we describe our methodology and results, followed by recommendations and a transition plan.

### **Research Methodology**

There are a variety of barriers and obstacles to gaining access to unique populations like former extremists. In particular, former white supremacists are often unwilling to be identified as such. First, they fear that information about their prior affiliations or activities will expose them to violence by current extremists, prosecution by the criminal justice system, or sanctions by current employers, neighbors, and family members. Second, unlike current members, former extremists cannot be found through network ties or spatial locations since most seek to sever connections to their previous lives. As there is no way to compile a list of former members to serve as a sampling frame, we identified interviewees by snowball sampling from multiple starts to ensure variety in the location and type of extremist group (Wright, Decker, Redfern, and Smith, 1992). We developed initial contacts for the snowball chains through a variety of means, including our research team's extensive prior research with active and inactive far-right extremists, by identifying former extremists with a public presence (e.g., media, book authors, lecture series), and by using referrals by our project partners.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The authors benefited from advice by three prominent human rights groups: Anti-Defamation League, Simon Wiesenthal Center, and Southern Poverty Law Center; and from an outreach organization, Life After Hate, that assists individuals exiting far right extremist groups.

Participants were interviewed across North America with 87 located in 24 states across the country and 4 in Canada. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years ( $M = 41.5$ ;  $SD = 8.6$ ) and included 70 men and 21 women. Twenty-one participants described their childhood socioeconomic status as lower-class, 22 as working class, 39 as middle-class, and nine as upper-class. In terms of involvement, participation ranged from three to 21 years ( $M = 9.9$ ;  $SD = 6.8$ ). Several participants had extensive histories of criminal conduct, including property offenses (e.g., shoplifting, vandalism) and various violent offenses such as murder, attempted murder, street fights, violent initiation rituals, and bomb-making. Of the 91 participants, 79 reported a history of delinquent activity, 63 reported a history of violent offending, and 53 reported a history of incarceration.

Since the current project's focus is on barriers to family intervention, we excluded thirteen participants from the original sample. These participants can be described as having family members who were directly involved in a white supremacist organization (e.g., "*Ever since we can remember it's had some involvement in our life... like our grandfather and our mom was all into National Socialism.*" – Lisa, Interview 82, 1/29/2016) who used the family as an active space for recruitment (Simi and Futrell, 2015). For this analysis, however, we wanted to exclusively focus on how "ordinary" (i.e., non-extremist) families respond to WSE. Moreover, eleven additional participants were excluded because the onset of their extremist involvement occurred during adulthood. Additional analysis should compare family responses to onset that occurs during childhood and adulthood.

Substantial rapport was established before interviews through regular contact with participants via telephone and email. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. They were conducted in private settings such as hotel rooms and residential



homes and public locations such as restaurants and coffee shops.<sup>2</sup> Most of the interviews were spent eliciting an in-depth life history to produce narratives that reflect the complexities and intersectionality of identity, ideology, and life experiences (McAdams, 1997). For example, subjects were asked to describe their childhood experiences as an initial starting point. In addition, the interviews included questions about broad phases of the subject's extremism, such as entry, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage subjects to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. While subjects were periodically asked direct questions to focus on specific topic areas, the interviews relied on an unstructured format intended to generate unsolicited data embedded in their narrative. We view the elicited narratives as instructive in assessing how individuals make sense of their lives (Blee, 1996; Copes, Hochstetler, and Forsyth, 2013; Giordano, Johnson, Manning, Longmore, and Minter, 2015; McAdams, 1997). Each interview concluded with more structured questions and scale items to collect comparable information across interviewees regarding risk factors (e.g., history of child abuse, mental health problems, etc.), demographic data, and criminality. Interviewing former extremists instead of current ones provided the ability to elicit information on highly sensitive issues such as previous involvement in violence, crime, and substance abuse.

The interviews lasted between four and more than eight hours and generated 10,882 pages of transcripts, which indicate the level of detail generated through the life histories. We analyzed the data using a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; see also Berg, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994), which allows researchers to combine a more open-ended, inductive approach while also relying on existing literatures and

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<sup>2</sup> There was a high degree of overlap between the individual interviewers as each interview was conducted with the same interview protocol and a subsample of interviews were conducted by multiple interviewers, which increased our ability to maintain consistency among the interviewer behaviors. To increase interviewer consistency, the research team regularly debriefed to discuss research methodology and design.

frameworks to guide the research and help interpret the findings.<sup>3</sup> The constant interaction with data also involved a virtual ongoing analysis and identification of social processes that affected each new round of interviews. The initial data coding began by reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line to determine differences and similarities within and across our subjects. Subsequent coding techniques helped identify and extract relevant empirical and conceptual properties and organize the data into similar concepts. Inductive codes emerged from the initial phase of line-by-line analysis (Berg, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland, 2006). Deductive codes were extracted from scholarly literature on white supremacy, group affiliation, and related topics. After the initial codes were developed, we compared and contrasted data themes, noting relations between them and moving back and forth between first-level data and general categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Several limitations are important to mention. First, the retrospective nature of the life history interviews raises questions about validity and reliability due to memory erosion, distortion, and selective recall (Baddeley, 1979). In addition, the practice of remembering is a reconstructive process where memories of events are typically reinterpreted during each recall (Bridge and Paller, 2012). Despite these concerns, the rich life history accounts provide essential insight from the subjects' perspective. Second, due to the relatively hidden nature of this population, the sample was derived through snowball techniques and, as a result, is not representative, which prevents generalizing from these findings. However, the goal of a grounded theory approach is to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data (or incidents), which the concepts are intended to represent. Although grounded theory is not intended to provide generalizations, the hypotheses developed can be tested in future studies.

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<sup>3</sup> All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with only minor edits.

While the interviews were not explicitly designed to address family responses to a person's radicalization toward WSE, the interviews produced important information about this issue. To be clear, these data reflect our participants' perceptions concerning how their relatives responded to their extremist participation. Thus, we use the life history data in this report to supplement the family interviews proposed as part of the larger project. The discussion of family responses to extremism immediately raises questions about parental effectiveness and if certain types of reactions are more effective than others. For good reason, there is strong interest in identifying whether specific family responses help disrupt the radicalization process. This type of evidence would provide more specific direction for how families can serve as counters to violent extremism and offer direction for how family responses might serve as models for other concerned bystanders such as educators, mental health practitioners, coaches, etc.

At the same time, examining family responses also raises the question of whether certain types of parenting unwittingly contribute to the onset of extremism. A large literature exists documenting the important role of parenting style as it relates to the onset of more generic types of antisocial behavior (Patterson, 1976; also see Simmons, Lehmann, and Dia, 2010). Patterson's (1982) "coercion theory" describes a process of mutual reinforcement where caregivers inadvertently reinforce children's difficult behavior eventually leading to the onset of antisocial behavior most often during late childhood or early adolescence. For example, Patterson and other colleagues have shown that certain types of ineffective parenting practices substantially increase the likelihood that youth will engage in delinquent behavior (e.g., hit peers, carry weapons) (see Gershoff, 2002; Patterson, 1997; Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). In short, we know parents shape their children's behavior in various ways. At the same time, the relationship between parenting and children's behavior is complicated as children also shape their parents'

behavior (Patterson, 1976). Models of childhood socialization have long rejected the notion that children are passive receptors but instead are actively engaged in a highly dynamic socialization process (Dreitzel 1973; also see Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992). We should also be clear that, to date, there are no empirical studies that specifically examine whether parenting styles influence the onset of WSE as opposed to more generic delinquency and criminality.

## **Results**

The interview participants recalled a range of responses by family members to their growing WSE radicalization. One of the most prominent responses involved variations of disapproval. We define disapproval as instances when relatives (most often, although not exclusively, parental custodians) expressed negative feedback regarding their relative's WSE involvement. We identified two types of disapproval: unqualified disapproval and qualified disapproval. As part of our analysis, we underscore the point that not all expressions of disapproval have the same characteristics and disapproval includes a broad range of variation.

### **Unqualified Disapproval: Clear & Unequivocal**

We refer to the first type of disapproval as “unqualified disapproval,” which we found present in 25 of the 67 participants' descriptions of family responses. By unqualified disapproval, we mean instances where family members actively express their disapproval in relatively clear and unequivocal terms. In these instances, the relative(s) expressed a full understanding of their child's involvement in WSE and initiated some intervention effort. The effectiveness of each response is beyond the scope of how we conceptualized and coded unqualified disapproval. For example, some instances may reflect parenting “best practices,” and other instances may be considered “abusive” and ineffective; unqualified disapproval includes

the entire range because our focus involved the extent to which responses were unequivocal, not whether the response was effective in terms of disrupting the radicalization process.

Unqualified disapproval ranged from verbal actions meant to discourage involvement in WSE to disciplinary actions such as “groundings” and the restriction of resources or privileges (e.g., phone or computer). As part of these actions, sometimes families expressed disapproval by destroying certain possessions related to WSE. For example, one family member destroyed the person’s racist skinhead boot laces because of their symbolic value.

*...My brother is more of the you’re-kind-of-a-fuck-up, to put it in other terms. While my sister was still coddling me, he was cutting the laces out of my boots, and stuff like that, telling me what a piece of shit I was, and stuff like that. I got kind of the good-cop, bad-cop. My sister was the good cop. (Adam, Interview 12, 9/16/2013).*

*...My mom would do the whole shakedown in our room and find literature and throw it away. I had to be creative where I hid stuff from my Klan rallies, and things like that ended up in the garbage. I would lie to my mom, “I’m out of it.” A month or two later, shakedown and find some stuff, “Oh, I’m out of it.” (Drew, Interview 7, 7/6/2013).*

These cases represent the literal effort to sever the persons’ WSE ties by disposing or destroying WSE propaganda but also reveals that internal family dynamics shape the types of responses such that one relative may respond in a harsh manner while another uses a different tact.

Families are complex systems (Cox and Paley, 1997) in that a family unit has interrelated parts that operate in ways that are both overlapping and independent. Each member has specific roles (parent, child etc.) which are connected to each other and family members also typically assume multiple roles within the same system (child and sibling; parent and spouse; etc.).

Therefore, it is important to consider the different components of the family system and their interrelatedness in shaping each person’s behavior as well as the overall performance of the system. In the first instance, the interview participant described siblings that differed in their approach to WSE with one sibling serving as “good cop” and the other as “bad cop.” It is likely

this approach emerged without explicit coordination between the siblings, but instead, reflected their more general roles within the family system. In this sense, to understand a family's response to WSE, it is imperative to understand how that family system typically operates (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland, 1963). In the second instance, the child plays a game of "cat and mouse" to find hiding places for their "secret stash" of WSE-related materials and offers false assertions about being "out of it" to placate their mother's efforts. In this example, the interactional exchanges that occur in response to the WSE issue likely represent broader family communication patterns.

In other cases, unqualified disapproval involved relatively formal family meetings used to express disapproval with WSE and in some instances plan alternate living preparations:

*I was brought into the living room and told that my father's health is deteriorating because of how horrible I am. My father, he is just kind of nodding along with it and how I need just not to be living with them anymore. And they are going to be starting proceedings to get the emancipation process started. But in the meantime, my sister, she had taken a position doing something at a local high school. So was she was going to come down and my dad was going to finance her getting an apartment and her being my guardian. (Zander, Interview 71, 12/21/2015).*

Similarly, in families characterized by divorce, sometimes the expression of disapproval included sending the child to the other parent's home or another relative's house (e.g., grandparent, aunt), or in the most extreme cases, permanently removing the child from the home (e.g., one participant's parent left them at a youth detention facility). Such cases represent clear and unequivocal expressions of disapproval and include direct, if not always effective or healthy, actions taken to address their relative's involvement in WSE.

### **Qualified Disapproval: Partial and Half Measure Responses**

We refer to the second type of disapproval as qualified disapproval. Like the first type of disapproval, the term "qualified" is not meant to characterize the response as effective or

ineffective. Instead, we are characterizing the extent that a family member engaged in an overt act of intervention to express their disapproval. An expression of qualified disapproval involves unclear and/or inconsistent overt acts. For example, saying one thing and equivocating or, alternatively, saying one thing and then doing something contradictory are both illustrative of qualified disapproval. Another dimension of qualified disapproval involves cases with a clear-cut overt act that are limited in response to certain aggravating factors. Of the interview participants, 42 of 67 described families that voiced disapproval but did not take decisive steps to intervene in their WSE.

The lack of an overt act may reflect several factors. On the one hand, the lack of response may indicate a type of parental neglect or incompetent parenting (Baumrind, 1970, 1991). At the same time, it may also be indicative of relatives who are either uncertain or feel “handcuffed” in terms of experiencing a “double bind” (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland, 1963). In the classic double bind, individuals experience a sense of being “damned if they do and damned if they don’t.” Relatives who confront a person involved in WSE must also confront the possibility of making the situation worse and possibly pushing the person further away and more closely into the arms of other extremists. This dilemma is no small concern. For example,

*My family was progressive to where it's like self-expression and all this stuff... Even when I was at my worst, when I was in high school, my dad was like, “What was I going to do?” He knew if he kicked me out, I had so many connections across the country with different groups that I would have taken a bus and left. His perspective was that he knew I was getting into bad shit, and I was probably doing bad shit. He wanted to leave it open that if I was going to get away, I had somewhere to go, which ended up being essential, or else I probably wouldn't be out of it right now. (Scott, Interview 11, 9/1/2013)*

In this case, the parent was aware and presumably did not approve of their child’s WSE but also concerned that overly decisive or punitive action would limit the potential for reconciliation. The parent was trying to “play the long game” by maintaining an amicable relationship with the hope

that eventually an opportunity would emerge to help their child disengage from WSE. From the interview participant's perspective, this strategy was ultimately effective and a substantial factor in their ability to leave WSE. Again, our purpose in categorizing unqualified as compared to qualified disapproval is not meant to suggest one is more suitable than the other but instead to describe different characteristics of family responses to WSE.

In terms of qualified disapproval, various participants described relatives who knew about their WSE and did not like but also did not do much about it. For example,

*I never hid it [involvement] from her... She didn't necessarily like it because she didn't... want the trouble... because it's like, "That's your life, that's your decision", but she didn't necessarily like it, you know. (Marjorie, Interview 38, 9/4/2015).*

Another participant explained,

*I had an airbrushed [picture] of Hitler hanging on my wall, and she's like, "Ah, what's this? And I'm like, "It's my room. It's my business. Don't worry about it." She did not like it at all, but she didn't make me take it down. (Alice, Interview 66, 10/30/2015)*

While each participant's relative expressed some degree of disapproval for their WSE involvement, each parent also communicated (even if unintentionally) some degree of ambivalence related to their child's WSE. According to each of the participants, their parents' messages about WSE were inconsistent, and, communicated something the children interpreted as "grudging acceptance" for WSE.

### **Qualified Disapproval: Avoiding Trouble**

A subtype of qualified disapproval involves instances where the disapproval was clear and unmistakable but limited in response to a focus on legal or social ramifications. By this, we mean the expression of disapproval only manifested as a specific response to legal or school troubles, rather than their involvement in WSE itself. In these cases, it appears family members knew about their relatives' involvement in WSE before any school or legal troubles and, from



the interview participants' perspective, did not express disapproval until educational, social, or legal issues emerged. We found 22 (52%) participants who discussed this type of qualified disapproval. In the examples below, each participant describes their parents' lack of response:

*She never addressed it. Not until I got in trouble. And then only partially in terms of staying out of trouble... I don't know that she agreed with what I was doing, but she definitely made statements to the effect of like, "the power of those who I'm choosing to fight is stronger than we'll overcome kind of thing." (Joel, Interview 60, 10/5/2015)*

*I kind of kept it separate, you know. Like I said, just living a double life, you know, but still, the signs were there and nobody, my parents, nobody, you know, "Why do you believe in this stuff?" You know, "You need to stop." It wasn't until I started getting arrested, you know, for fighting that it was an issue. (Saul, Interview 39, 9/5/2015)*

In addition to legal or school concerns, in other cases, families limited the focus of their response to the social stigma associated with white supremacy. For example,

*I know he doesn't like the swastika tattooed on my foot, you know. When I got that, he was always making comments about it... He had an issue with that. He hated it and told me I need to get it off. He didn't say much else about what I was doing. He just said, "That's terrible. You need to get that off." (Bertha, Interview 34, 7/20/2015)*

*My mom and my dad tried to talk me out of joining the national alliance because they didn't think I should actually publicly join anything. Once my name is out there, that's going to be attacked, run through the mud. They were right as far as my name being run through the mud. (Eddie, Interview 42, 9/20/2015)*

In these instances, the participants suggest the response communicated a greater concern for "appearances" rather than the immoral or unethical nature of WSE.

In a related example, a participant describes his parent's reaction, which included a demonstration regarding the financial consequences that may result from involvement in WSE:

*It was funny because my dad seemed like he was most disappointed in me because I wasn't going to make any money. I remember him holding up a credit card application and unfolding it with the big long line of fine print and all that shit he had to fill out. "Do you have any idea what it takes to get one of these? You'll never be able to get one of these doing this stupid Nazi stuff. (Andrew, Interview 4, 5/4/2013)*

In this instance, the parent intended the credit card application to convey how their child's involvement in WSE would result in certain financial consequences and, more broadly, limit their child's life chances. The child, however, interpreted the disapproval as an expression of financial concern more so than a moral objection to their involvement in WSE. Without interviewing the parent, it is difficult to discern more about how the parent expressed their disapproval. Disapproval, like most things we communicate, is largely contingent on interpretation. These interpretations leave lots of room for partial or complete misunderstanding. Next, we turn to how certain aspects of family dynamics serve as barriers to intervention.

### **Barriers to Intervention**

This section describes several obstacles that prevented or decreased the likelihood that a family could intervene. First, several individuals described how their indoctrination worked against the potential for intervention. In this sense, the WSE (or any extremist) ideology served as a "firewall" against "counternarratives" their families deployed. For example,

*We figured they were deceived, that they had just bought into the whole brainwashing...If anything, it made me dig my heels in harder. (Harry, Interview 5, 5/22/2013).*

*I used to be very critical and I would think that anything you were saying is propaganda, so it would actually probably hurt the situation. (Anders, Interview 70, 11/2/2015).*

Both participants describe a "retrenchment process" (Aly, Weimann-Saks, & Weimann, 2014) where disapproving responses to an individual's behavior or ideas leads the individual to strengthen rather than weaken their commitment and identification with the behavior or ideas. This type of unintentional consequence is often a concern with public health campaigns and should be a point of consideration with terrorism prevention as well.

A second barrier to intervention involves familial factors, which are particularly important during childhood and adolescence when the family acts as the primary agent of

socialization (Cernkovich and Giordano, 1987; Hoeve et al., 2009; Warr, 2007). Patterson and colleagues (1989, 1991) assert that family structures are especially important because offenders learn antisocial ways of dealing with conflict through their parents. This is particularly true for offenders who come from abusive families or families that lack supervision, use harsh disciplinary practices, and whose parents have a history of criminality, drug use, and/or marital discord (Dishion and McMahon, 1998; Farrington, 1995; Loeber and Dishion, 1983; Patterson, Capaldi, and Bank, 1991; Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey, 1989; Widom, 1989). Overall, rates of trauma for the current sample more closely approximate a “high risk” juvenile offending sample than a non-offending adult sample, with 63 percent of participants having experienced four or more adverse experiences before age 18 (Windisch, Simi, Blee, and DeMichele, 2020; also see Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz, 2016). As a result of childhood adversity, parental mental illness, and/or parental substance abuse, participants discuss a lack of social support and supervision. For example,

*We don't have any guidance from our parents, like none of them were aware enough to be like, "maybe you shouldn't be part of this," you know... I'd say I was going to the library, and I would lie and go to the bowling alley. It didn't matter what I'd say. She was not okay enough [under the influence] to care. (Maddox, Interview 57, 9/19/2015)*

The above narrative illustrates the perceived inattention that corresponded with their parents' substance use problem and, more generally, points to link between issues like substance use and diminished parental effectiveness. Moreover, participants also discussed various negative emotions and low self-esteem they attributed to family-level disruptions and poor communications patterns. For example,

*I was never taught right from wrong. Good behavior was never encouraged, and bad behavior was never discouraged. There were no hugs when you were hurt and none when you were good. I felt worthless from never having heard anything positive about myself from my parents, my whole life.” (Jackie, Interview 22, 4/5/2014)*

In the case above, the participant describes emotional neglect from their parents during childhood and adolescence. This finding underscores the often “invisible” elements of trauma and abuse. While many of the participants’ experiences with childhood maltreatment resulted in physical injuries, childhood trauma also involves emotional damage that is more difficult to identify. Like other participants, the example illustrates the tenuous and unpredictable environments many of these individuals grew up in as children. These experiences weaken familial bonds and generate feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger.

### **Conclusion**

This research brief is one deliverable for the project, “Barriers to Family Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) of Mobilization Behaviors and Pre-Operational Planning.” This particular research brief relied on existing life history data that involved interviews with former white supremacist extremists (DeMichele, Blee, and Simi, 2015) to examine how relatives interpreted potential “warning signs” and what, if any, action relatives pursued to address perceived radicalization. Overall, there are two key findings.

First, the interview participants recalled a range of responses by family members to their growing radicalization toward WSE. One of the most prominent responses involved variations of disapproval. We identified two types of disapproval: *unqualified disapproval* and *qualified disapproval*. In terms of unqualified disapproval, slightly more than one-third (37%) of the sample recalled family members actively expressing their disapproval in relatively clear and unequivocal terms and initiating some intervention effort (e.g., restriction of resources or privileges (e.g., phone or computer) and/or “groundings”). In terms of qualified disapproval, roughly two-thirds (63%) of participants recalled relatives voicing their disapproval but without decisive action to intervene or limiting their objections to certain legal or social ramifications.

Second, we identified two barriers to family intervention that prevented or decreased the likelihood that a family could effectively intervene. The first barrier involved ideological “firewalls” that served to neutralize family interventions by discrediting the source, motivation, and/or content of the counternarratives. In several cases, the family intervention had the unintended consequence of strengthening rather than weakening the participant’s resolve. A second barrier to family intervention involved familial factors such as childhood abuse and family dysfunction (e.g., parental substance abuse). As a result of childhood adversity, parental mental illness, and/or parental substance abuse, participants discussed a lack of social support and supervision. These experiences decreased the likelihood of identifying the WSE problem (or assessing the full gravity of the problem) because attention was often focused elsewhere.

While the effectiveness of these interventions is beyond the scope of the current research brief, our findings have relevance to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in terms of helping understand reporting behavior among family members. Specifically, while families often expressed some form of disapproval to relatives involved in WSE, these responses were often limited to “staying out of trouble.” DHS and other key stakeholders may consider highlighting the non-legal ramifications of extremist participation such as long-term “identity residual” associated with hate (Simi, Blee, DeMichele, & Windisch, 2017). Moreover, efforts should be made to increase parents’ reliance on governmental or non-governmental agencies to support interventions as well as youth and social services in terms of providing counseling that focuses on both non-white supremacist extremism issues (e.g., academic failure, generic delinquency) and white supremacist extremism issues. Part of this endeavor also means helping raise awareness among families about potential non-governmental resources that can help address radicalization before it occurs or early in the process before anyone is harmed.

## **Transition Plan**

The next phase of the current project is to incorporate interviews with family members of individuals who radicalize toward violent extremism. As part of Year 1, the PIs conducted a pilot study consisting of interviews with four family members. These interviews allowed for an assessment of the feasibility related to recruiting a sample of family members. As part of the sampling process, the PIs cultivated several different contacts used to recruit individuals who fit the study parameters. For example, multiple non-governmental organizations that work with extremists' relatives are providing project support for the recruitment of individual participants. These contacts will be critical in terms of using the findings to inform prevention strategies and inform existing policy related to terrorism prevention.

The PIs were able to successfully recruit four study participants with additional individuals who have agreed to participate as Year 2 unfolds. The pilot study interviews also provided preliminary findings that will be used to inform Year 2 where the project will focus primarily on accruing a larger sample of family interviews. In the section below, we provide a brief series of highlights regarding some of the key themes in the pilot study interviews.

First, the family member interviews are consistent with the perceptions of former extremists who described how different types of family-level instabilities increased the likelihood of various types of negative consequences including the onset of radicalization. In turn, these instabilities impaired the family system and diminished family members' capacity to recognize and respond to their relatives' radicalization.

Second, family members describe a general lack of awareness specifically related to extremism which also diminished the capacity for relatives to recognize the problem and/or appreciate the gravity of the problem. Related to lack awareness, families also struggled with the

uncertainty of how to best respond once they did recognize the problem. Part of this struggle involved concerns about responses that would push the person away and/or sever the relationship. The lack of awareness and challenges of responding in a constructive manner were also expressed by the former extremists in terms of their descriptions of family dynamics. Clearly, a larger sample of interviews with family members is needed to draw more definitive conclusions and provide more specific guidance in terms of policy and practitioner interventions.

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