

Enhancing Bystander Reporting To Prevent Terrorism

Bystanders who recognize, intervene, and report concerning behaviors and indicators to authorities enhance terrorism prevention. However, some bystanders^a face barriers to reporting these indicators. This First Responder's Toolbox highlights considerations for engaging with bystanders to overcome those barriers.

Categories of Bystanders	
	Family • Parents • Siblings • Extended family
	Peers • Close friends • Acquaintances • Coworkers • Classmates
	Authority Figures • Law enforcement officers • Educators • Workplace supervisors • Health professionals • Religious leaders
	Strangers • Commercial sector representatives • Financial sector representatives • Social media users

Common Barriers to Bystander Reporting

Bystanders may be reluctant to report behaviors indicative of terrorism for several reasons, including:

- concern that a loved one could be arrested
- fear of being perceived as an alarmist
- fear of potentially slandering an innocent person
- not recognizing the importance of their observations
- not trusting law enforcement
- not knowing the reporting mechanisms available to them

^a Bystanders are people whose relationship and level of interaction with a person of concern enables them to witness or become aware of activities or behavior reasonably indicative of terrorism or other criminal activity.

Parental and Peer Bystanders

Family members and peers face additional emotional barriers to contacting law enforcement about someone who is showing signs of radicalization or mobilization to violence. They fear betraying the trust of a loved one, incurring negative reactions of others within a family or social group, and concern about long prison sentences for loved ones.

- Ways to alleviate these emotional hurdles may include: building trust, adopting empathy-centered approaches when talking to bystanders, validating bystander concerns, ensuring transparency and safety, providing positive reinforcement, and offering to connect parents with others whose children have radicalized or mobilized to violence.
- Providing multiple channels to share concerns with trusted interlocutors **outside** of law enforcement—such as religious leaders or a community ombudsman—may also increase reporting rates because family members and peers tend to mistrust law enforcement more than other kinds of bystanders.



SCOPE: This product provides best practices to first responders on how they can encourage bystander reporting to improve terrorism prevention and expands upon a previously published First Responder's Toolbox "[Bystanders Are Key to Countering Terrorism](#)," 2020.

Creating Intervention Options

Developing options other than arrest for people at risk of committing terrorism would probably encourage bystanders to report suspicious behaviors.

- The **Threat Assessment/Threat Management (TATM)** approach provides public safety personnel with options for responding to people whose behavior demonstrates they are a risk for committing future violent acts by working with community partners outside of law enforcement. For more information, see First Responder's Toolbox "[Threat Assessment and Threat Management \(TATM\)](#)," 2024.

Resources

DHS

The **Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3)** works with communities to strengthen our country's targeted violence and terrorism prevention abilities through funding, training, and increasing public awareness. <https://www.dhs.gov/CP3>

- **Regional Prevention Coordinators (RPCs)** are stationed across the United States to support prevention efforts at the local level. To learn more contact: CP3Field@hq.dhs.gov
- The **Prevention Resource Finder** is a comprehensive website that provides information on preventing targeted violence and terrorism. <https://www.dhs.gov/prevention>

US Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) conducts research, training, and consultation on threat assessment and the prevention of targeted violence. Its report on bystanders, "Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs," May 2023, is available on the Secret Service website. <http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac>

National Threat Evaluation and Reporting (NTER) Program Office equips federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private-sector partners with tools and resources to identify, report, and, mitigate threats of terrorism and targeted violence. <https://www.dhs.gov/nter>

- **SAR Fundamentals eLearning** provides users with an understanding of the Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) evaluation process used to determine whether identified behavior adheres to the Information Sharing Environment Functional Standard criteria, in accordance with privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties protections. <https://www.dhs.gov/form/ntsi/nter>

FBI

The **Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU), Behavioral Threat Assessment Center (BTAC)** is a national-level, multiagency, multidisciplinary task force focused on the prevention of terrorism and targeted violence through the application of behavior-based operational support, training, and research. Encouraging bystander reporting is one of its top missions. Requests for BTAC assistance can be made through the BAU Coordinator of the local FBI Field Office. <https://le.fbi.gov/science-and-lab/behavioral-analysis>

NCTC

NCTC regional representatives are stationed across the United States and are great points of contact for information sharing, briefings, and engagement on issues relating to counterterrorism across their respective regions. They can be contacted by emailing NCTC-Domestic-Reps@odni.gov

For copies of NCTC products and other information, including requests for briefings on radicalization and mobilization, please contact your NCTC regional representative.



NOTICE: This is a Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) product. JCAT is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, the FBI, and state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The product promotes coordination among intergovernmental authorities and the private sector in identifying, preventing, and responding to terrorist activities. Consider the enclosed information within the context of existing laws, regulations, authorities, agreements, policies or procedures. For additional information contact us at JCAT@ODNI.GOV. **This document is best printed in 11 X 17.**

Enhancing Bystander Reporting To Prevent Terrorism (continued)

CONSIDERATIONS

The following are considerations to encourage bystander reporting:

1 Enhancing Education and Awareness

- **Community outreach programs:** Organize workshops and campaigns to educate the public on what constitutes suspicious activity related to terrorism, how to report it, and the importance of early intervention.
- **Media campaigns:** Use multiple media channels to spread awareness about suspicious activity related to terrorism and reporting mechanisms.
- **School programs:** Integrate terrorism-related warning signs into existing violence and gang prevention programs.
- **Training on effective reporting:** Equip people with skills to observe, document, and report suspicious activity related to radicalization and mobilization.

Resources for Awareness Building

The **US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Booklet (2021 Edition)** is an NCTC, DHS, and FBI tri-seal product that provides a list of observable behaviors related to terrorism that can help bystanders understand what activities to report.^b <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-newsroom/nctc-resources/3590-u-s-violent-extremist-mobilization-indicators-2021>

DHS's **Foundations of Targeted Violence Prevention eLearning** is a bystander awareness training intended to educate the public on threatening or potentially concerning behaviors and where to report them, providing an opportunity for intervention to prevent targeted violence from occurring. <https://www.dhs.gov/foundations-targeted-violence-prevention>

FBI's **Prevent Mass Violence** campaign includes resources to help potential bystanders understand what behaviors may be concerning and ways to respond, including brochures for bystander categories and a public service announcement. <https://fbi.gov/prevent>

NCTC has published a series of pamphlets to to raise awareness of radicalization to violence in hopes of increasing bystander intervention. Copies can be obtained by emailing NCTC-Domestic-Reps@odni.gov. The pamphlets include:

- Radicalization Dynamics of Violent Extremists
- Understanding and Mitigating Youth Vulnerabilities to Extremist Messaging
- Understanding Bystander Interventions To Prevent Terrorism

^b **WARNING:** Indicators in and of themselves may be lawful conduct or behavior and constituting rights guaranteed by the US Constitution. Moreover, evaluating the totality of behavioral indicators and other relevant circumstances helps ensure no single indicator is used as the basis for action.

2 Improving Reporting Methods

- **Multiple reporting channels:** Provide reporting options beyond calling 911, such as using anonymous online platforms, text messages, and mobile apps. Include ways to share concerns with trusted figures outside of law enforcement, such as religious or community leaders.
- **Clear and concise guidelines:** Clearly define what constitutes suspicious activity related to terrorism, provide easy-to-remember examples, and encourage reporting even if the bystander is unsure that the activity indicates terrorism.
- **Assurance of anonymity and safety:** Emphasize the anonymity and safety of reporting, ensuring that witnesses are not penalized for coming forward.

Provide Multiple Reporting Channels

Reporting directly to a trusted adult

Submitting a tip via phone

Submitting a tip via email or online form

Submitting a tip via text or mobile application

Topics for Effective Reporting Training

- Importance of bystander reporting
- What behaviors, concerns, or situations related to terrorism to report
- How to submit a report (via each mode offered)
- What happens after a report is submitted, to include conditions to maintain anonymity; who is involved in receiving and responding to reports; and how a bystander will receive feedback

3 Building Trust Between Law Enforcement and the Community

- **Positive reinforcement:** Acknowledge and commend people who report, highlighting their role in preventing potential acts of terrorism. Educate people about how their actions—even those that seem insignificant—can make a difference. If possible, share data that shows the effect of reporting.
- **Collaboration with community leaders:** Partner with local leaders and organizations to build trust and encourage open communication about safety.
- **Follow-up on reports:** Inform communities about the outcome of reported activity, showcasing the effectiveness of their vigilance and reinforcing the importance of reporting.
- **Addressing fear of retaliation:** Recognize the fear of reprisal as a potential barrier and offer support services and protective measures for witnesses.

“Sharing high-level information about response actions taken with the reporting community can help to support both the perceived fairness of a program . . . and the perceived effectiveness.”

—Taken from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency & US Secret Service report, “Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs,” May 2023



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<https://www.JCAT-url.com>

For further information, please email JCAT
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(U) The Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, FBI, state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The First Responder's Toolbox is an ad hoc, unclassified reference aid intended to promote counterterrorism coordination among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government authorities and partnerships with private sector officials in deterring, preventing, disrupting, and responding to terrorist attacks.