

DHS has a program to fight domestic extremism, but critics question how effective it really is

After the Buffalo shooting, federal efforts to combat radicalization are receiving renewed attention – and facing tough questions about how to determine who is a threat.



— President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden visit a memorial across the street from the Tops Friend Market in Buffalo, N.Y., on Tuesday. Andrew Harnik / AP

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By Jon Schuppe

A Department of Homeland Security program that targets violent extremism is drawing fresh scrutiny after a [shooting massacre in a largely Black neighborhood of Buffalo](#), New York, on Saturday.

In the wake of the shootings, Department of Homeland Security officials have highlighted the work of the [Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program](#), which distributed \$20 million last year nationwide. The program funds efforts by law enforcement, university researchers and community groups to help identify people at risk of becoming radicalized by extremist beliefs and get them counseling and other support services.

“It is the school teacher, the family, the neighbor, the faith leader. It is friends, it is people in the communities who can identify this conduct,” Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in a call this week with law enforcement officials, civil rights leaders and religious groups. “And we need to guide them effectively, to report it to law enforcement and to other authorities, so that we can intervene and do the best we can to prevent a tragedy such as that occurred this past Saturday in Buffalo, New York, from ever occurring.”

But critics question whether the grants are effective in preventing violence, and they say the program could violate people’s civil rights by sweeping up some people who have no intention of hurting others, while missing people who pose a threat.

“This program is useless and can only do harm,” said Harsha Panduranga, counsel to the Liberty & National Security Program at the Brennan Center for Justice, a nonpartisan institute at New York University’s School of Law. “Our standpoint would be just to get rid of it.”

The grant program, which began under President Barack Obama, has a rocky history, including accusations that it targeted Muslim Americans and [minimized the threat from far-right extremists](#) in later years, during the administration of President Donald Trump. Those failures have forced a rebranding of the program under President Joe Biden, who said he was motivated to run in part by a violent 2017 demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia, involving white supremacists.

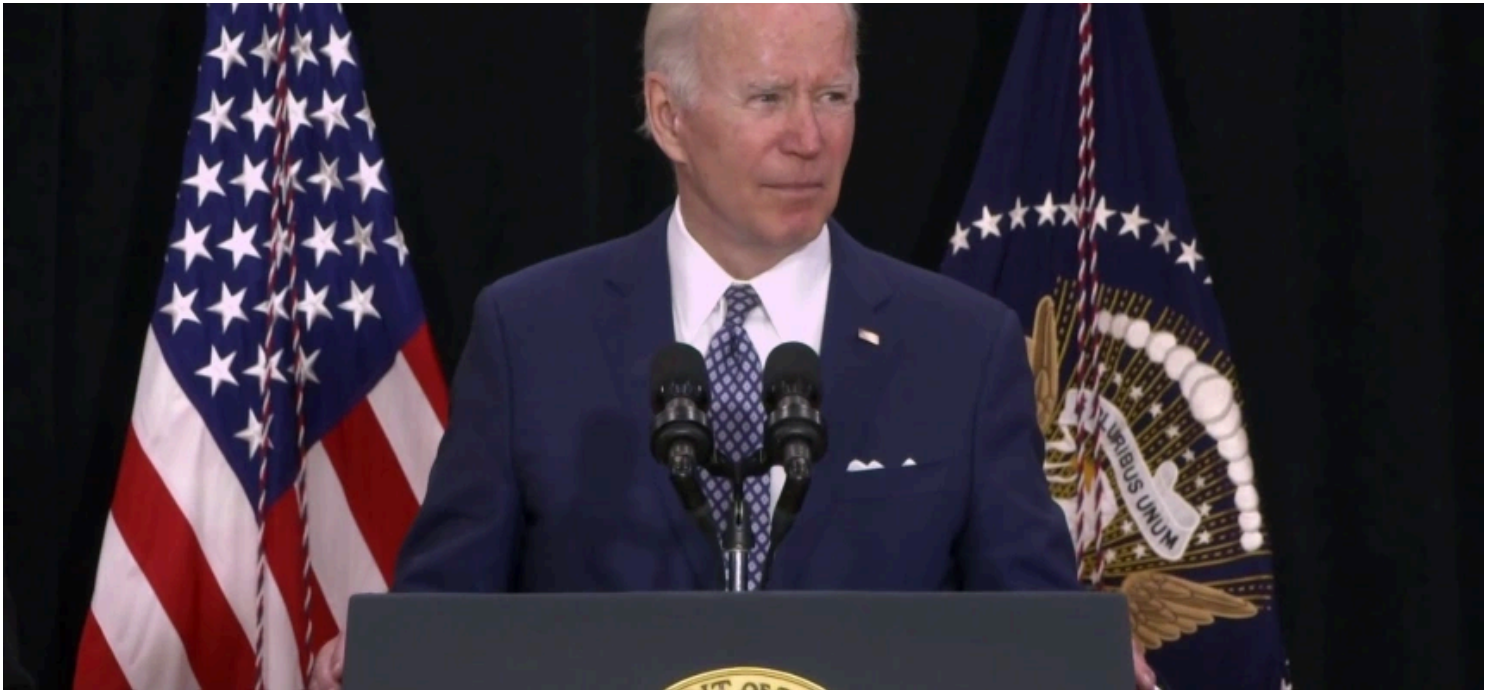
The Buffalo attack, in which 10 people were killed and three were injured, has revived talk about the grant program because there were warning signs about the accused shooter, who authorities said was a white supremacist fueled by hatred of Black people.

The suspect, 18, is believed to be the author of a [180-page document](#) uploaded days before the attack that describes being radicalized on the extremist website 4chan and cited racist conspiracy theories. Last year, when the suspect was a high school student, he was taken to a hospital for a mental health evaluation after saying he wanted to commit a murder/suicide, but was not charged with a crime because the threat was not specific, authorities said.

In the days since the shooting, Department of Homeland Security officials have emphasized their efforts to combat domestic violent extremism, including the grant program. Under Biden, the program's activities are reviewed by the department's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.

'Hate will not prevail': Biden speaks in Buffalo after 10 are killed in mass shooting

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But civil liberties advocates say the program could alienate more people than it helps by unfairly labeling many troubled people as potential terrorists and referring them to law enforcement. That may make it more difficult to identify people who are actually planning an attack, Panduranga said.

The risk factors for radicalization [adopted by the Department of Homeland Security](#) include criminal history, mental health problems, unemployment, low level of education and “social alienation.” Panduranga wrote [a 2021 report](#) that said the program would fail to prevent violence and risk violating people's rights of free speech, assembly and religion. Instead, he said, authorities should focus on people who have already shown warning signs, such as participants in violent far-right rallies or the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

“We have serious concerns about a model in which you can pick up on who is going to be the next terrorist and mass shooter by looking at behavioral indicators like feeling hopeless, having a grievance, having mental health issues, following a particular ideology,” Panduranga said. “Given the breadth of warning signs it uses, we're worried that it can be a vehicle for biases.”

The grant program, originally called Countering Violent Extremism, [began during the Obama administration](#) amid heightened concerns about attacks from ISIS, an Islamist terror group. Activists said the program unfairly targeted Muslim communities and questioned the methods used to identify people vulnerable to radicalization. Opponents said the program also did not pay sufficient attention to right-wing extremists, who, [according to the Southern Poverty Law Center](#), were responsible for 75 percent of the 443 extremist-related killings from 2012 to 2021.

That criticism deepened under Trump, when the Department of Homeland Security rescinded some Obama-era grants and focused even more on Muslims, immigrants and refugees, [according to the Brennan Center](#). The program, renamed Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, shrunk in size and budget, and for three years stopped issuing grants.

But the Department of Homeland Security continued to endorse the program, [publishing a 2020 study](#) that found promising work by several recipients, including a Nebraska project that “increased the likelihood” of referrals to community-based support services, a Houston crisis intervention hotline that received 167 calls over two years, and a Denver Police Department program that trained hundreds of officers on recognizing signs of violent extremist threats. The report concluded that the early prevention efforts were relatively low cost, “successful and needed to be scaled across the country.”

In fiscal year 2020 Congress restored \$10 million in grants. The following year, the amount doubled. Under Biden, the Department of Homeland Security renamed the office overseeing the grants as the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships. Compared with the original grant program, in which nearly half of the 25 recipients were law enforcement organizations, the rebranded program became more diverse, with law enforcement groups making up about a third of the 38 recipients. The list now includes groups [across a wider variety of fields](#), including the Boston Children’s Hospital, the violence-interruption group Cure Violence and Life After Hate, which fights white supremacist ideology and whose original grant was rescinded under Trump.

The goal under Biden is to create a network of local service providers trained to notice when a person exhibits signs of violent extremism, provide that person with help – and, if needed, get police involved, Homeland Security officials said. That approach is based on research about suicide prevention, drug abuse prevention and gang violence prevention, they said.



Samantha Vinograd, acting assistant secretary for counterterrorism and threat prevention at the Department of Homeland Security, said in an interview that the agency was committed to regaining the trust of communities that felt stigmatized by the earlier programs. But the department was also aware that the threat of terrorism and targeted violence is “incredibly diversified,” which makes the broader approach necessary.

“It’s about getting individuals the help they need at the earliest possible time,” Vinograd said. “We don’t want to wait until an individual is about to commit an act of violence to engage in violence prevention.”

Among the current grant recipients is Music in Common, which has people from different races collaborate on musical projects. After losing its 2016 grant, the group received \$400,000 last year, which it is using to conduct programs in six cities.

“We need more on-the-ground community projects like this. That’s how over time we will see an actual change in these violent behaviors,” said Todd Mack, the program’s executive director.

Mack said that the race-based hate in the Buffalo document is what his organization tries to extinguish. “If the shooter in Buffalo had been exposed to something like what we do, where a connection could have been made on a personal level with people they ‘hate,’ that might have changed the course of actions,” Mack said.

Ryan Greer, director of national security for the American Defamation League, said the current version of the grants program does the right thing by taking a public health approach to violent extremism. His organization wants to see the grants expanded to \$150 million a year.

But Greer acknowledged that there hasn't been enough effort or money put into evaluating the programs' effectiveness. A [2021 Government Accountability Office report](#) called for more data collection "to determine whether the grant programs are achieving their intended outcomes."

Panduranga noted that some of the grant recipients – such as Music in Common – are worthwhile but should not be funded or overseen by the Department of Homeland Security under the label of countering terrorism. Instead, he said, they should be run by social service or education agencies.

"They should be funded by the people with the right expertise and not framed in a way that labels people as potential terror attackers," Panduranga said.



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