Just Preventing Terrorism and Targeted Violence

Intro [00:00:01] RTI International's Justice Practice Area presents Just Science.

Intro [00:00:10] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode three of our domestic radicalization season Just Science sat down with Sarah Cook and Ariane Noar, researchers in the Security and Extremism Research Program at RTI International, to discuss how their work contributes to the prevention of violent extremism. Many organizations across the country receive funding from the Department of Homeland Security to implement programs that aim to prevent terrorism and targeted violence, to better understand if these programs are effective and to identify promising practices is important to collect data and conduct evaluations. Listen along as Sarah and Ariane describe the need for terrorism and targeted violence prevention, their methods for conducting data driven program evaluations, and how they engage practitioners who may not be accustomed to research practices. This episode is funded by RTI International's Justice Practice Area. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses, or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Michael Planty.

Michael Planty [00:01:14] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Mike Planty, with the Justice Practice Area at RTI International. Our topic today is focused on targeted violence and terrorism prevention. The United States faces an increasing complex and evolving threat of terrorism and targeted violence. These threats are from foreign organizations highlighted by the events of 9/11, but also include a growing threat from domestic actors inspired by violent extremist ideologies. There is a need to build on existing best practices, identifying promising new approaches and developing a holistic approach to prevention and response. Today, we will discuss some federal programs that have been developed across the nation aimed at identifying and preventing these attacks. A critical component, and the focus of our talk today is figuring out what works, what challenges and successes are these programs facing, and how do we go about developing the best scientific evidence that supports the scalability and sustainability of promising programs? Today, we're excited to speak with Sarah Cook and Ariane Noar, two researchers on the front line of these targeted violence and terrorism program evaluations. Welcome to the podcast, Sara.

Sarah Cook [00:02:11] Thanks.

Michael Planty [00:02:11] Welcome to the podcast, Ariane.

Ariane Noar [00:02:12] Thanks for having me.

Michael Planty [00:02:13] Sara is director of the Security and Extremism Research Program at RTI, and she also leads the Targeted Violence to Terrorism Prevention Evaluation project we're going to be talking about today. Her work currently focuses on terrorism prevention, mass violence research, and program evaluation. She has a background both in criminology and survey methodology and has been at RTI for 16 years. Ariane is a researcher on the Security and Extremism Research Program and works on Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Evaluation Project as well. Her work has focused on countering violent extremism and targeted violence and terrorism prevention in the Middle East, Africa and now here in the United States. To kick us off,

Sara, tell us about what led you and your team to focus on this issue and research studies on TV and terrorism prevention.

Sarah Cook [00:02:53] A few years ago, Matthew DeMichele had done some work on exiting white supremacy and also work with DHS, starting a project evaluating grantees for the fiscal year 16 Countering Violent Extremism Grant program, or the CDC Grant program, similar to the TTP Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention program we're talking about today. But this is kind of the precursor to that. So we started doing those evaluations in about 2018. I had not really been focused on this area before, so I kind of fell into working with Matthew. And as we were doing these evaluations, it became very clear to me how much work is being done and also how little we know in this field. It's a very emerging field. It's not something that's been researched as long as other areas of criminology, such as policing or corrections. Those have been researched for many, many, many years. As we're working on fiscal year 16 CDC evaluations, learning more and more about the field and what's happening. And also where there are gaps, there was a gap in the funding for the grants from fiscal year 16 to fiscal year 20. And the fiscal year 20 grants came out at about that time. And, you know, Matthew and I kind of talked about, you know, let's let's do this. We're both really interested in this, very fascinated in this work, a big need for more work, more research in this field, definitely more evaluation of the work that's been done, by practitioners. So about that time, we talked folks here at RTI and ended up becoming a program, hiring people who focus on this type of research, such as Ariane. And from there, we just kind of grew and have been doing work for DHS, a couple of different, very interesting projects.

Michael Planty [00:04:38] Just quickly, DHS, Department of Homeland Security. When you talk about grants and grantees, this is funding that local practitioners organizations are receiving to develop programs around prevention?

Sarah Cook [00:04:48] Yes, these grants are available to any sort of state, local, tribal, territorial governments, nonprofits, institutions of higher learning. And this includes things like law enforcement agency, state homeland security offices.

Michael Planty [00:05:03] Before we go any further, let's provide our listeners some basic terminology. For our audience, what do we mean when we refer to targeted violence and terrorism?

Ariane Noar [00:05:10] Yeah. So maybe I'll start with targeted violence, since I think probably fewer people are familiar with that term than terrorism, which of course, we've heard about for quite a while now. So targeted violence is really violence that is premeditated and that is directed at a specific individual, specific groups or specific locations. So thinking about, you know, practical example of this, it might be, for example, a shooting that happens because of a workplace disagreement. Right? That's something that maybe we've heard about on the news in comparison to targeted violence. And we have violent extremism. And that's when, you know, an individual or group commits a violent act or supports the commitment of violent acts in support of a particular set of beliefs or an ideology. And so it's really the ideology piece that I think, or a lot of people can act as that clear differentiating factor between targeted violence and violent extremism. So, of course, we've heard over the years a lot about jihadist extremism. That's one set of beliefs that someone might commit a violent act in support of. There's also white supremacist violent extremism that stems from essentially the belief that white people constitute a superior race. That's another, you know, example of an ideology that someone might have heard of, which might constitute violent extremism. Another term that you

might hear us talk about is radicalization. And that's the process, essentially, of someone coming to adopt these radical beliefs, these positions, or taking action in support of them. So you'll hear us talk about that as well.

Michael Planty [00:06:38] Sarah, can you provide some examples just to bring our listeners, you know, some concrete examples of these types of events? Just listening to Ariane, in terms of the intention, sometimes there's events that you think they might be connected, right? They're obvious. Right? Because someone's wrote a manifesto or there's clear signs. But other cases, there might not be evidence that truly says this is something that was targeted.

Sarah Cook [00:06:59] That's exactly right, Mike. So some examples that I think those listeners would be familiar with. One would be the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. That's an example of terrorism. There was ideology behind that that we were aware of. Another example is the top shooting that happened in Buffalo just within the last two years in 2022. So that's an example of violent extremism, racial or ethnic motivated violent extremism. Again, we know from law enforcement and what they learned in their investigation that this mass violence is motivated because of a racial or ethnic group and someone's feelings towards them. Another example that most people don't think of when they think of, you know, they hear terrorism or targeted violence is the school shootings like example, Sandy hook shooting that happened in 2012. So that's an example of targeted violence. We are not aware of any type of ideology that was motivating that shooting, but it was clearly targeted at a specific location and at a specific school.

Michael Planty [00:07:57] For example, the shooting in Las Vegas, at the country music concert where large number of people were shot and killed. The intention wasn't clear, but it is considered targeted violence because of the actions that played out.

Sarah Cook [00:08:08] Absolutely, yes. And I think one thing, you know, just as we're talking about the intention behind this, you know, some people I would imagine might say, well, why does it matter? You know, the reason why they did this, right? At the end of the day, they did the shooting or the bombing or they killed whoever. The reason why we, you know, distinguish between these two things is because in this field of prevention of these attacks, we want to think about is the intention behind the attack. Does that tell us anything about what led up to the attack? Essentially, is there something about the intention that can help us in figuring out how best to prevent these types of acts? And it might be that the best way to prevent certain acts of targeted violence is totally different than how we can best prevent certain acts of violence, extremism, or terrorism. So to something also to explain why we put this emphasis on the intention.

Michael Planty [00:08:55] Just to distinguish what's not included, something like a robbery. Right? The intention there is motivated by monetary gain. These are really driven by ideology. Now let's move to program evaluation project is centered on evaluating the Department of Homeland Security's Targeted Violent Terrorism Prevention Program grantees. Tell us about this project and how it works with DHS.

Sarah Cook [00:09:13] DHS, like most organizations of the government, have multiple arms. The TVTP Targeted Violence Terrorism Prevention grant program, is funded by the center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, most commonly known as CP3, because that is a mouthful. So they are the arm of DHS that funds the TVTP grant program, that are the grantees that we evaluate so far to date up through fiscal year 22, fiscal year 23, they funded 143 grants, and that has allocated $70 million in funding to

targeted violence and terrorism prevention efforts. So that's a huge scope right there. So we're funded by a different arm, which is the Science and Technology Directorate at DHS. They're sort of the research and development arm of DHS. So we complete separate and independent third party evaluations. We're not even directly working the CP3 we're working with SMT. So we are not a part at all of the process of picking grants. You know, looking at the grants, we are completely sort of separate. And that's intentional. So we have done a subset of grantees. As I mentioned, that's a 143 is a lot of different grantees. So what we do is we evaluate as a subset of these. For fiscal year 20, we evaluated six grantees out of that cohort for fiscal year 21, 22, and 23. We are evaluating seven grantees from each of those cohorts. So that's 21 in total with the fiscal year 20's. And then if you consider the Countering Violent Extremism grant evaluations that we did, which was sort of the precursor grant program to this one overall, we either are currently evaluating or have evaluated 32 different grant programs and grantees, because we're doing all different grantees with each of the evaluations that we're doing so far, the grantees that we are evaluating, these are a variety of types of organizations state, local, tribal and territorial governments, universities or institutes of higher education, nonprofit organizations, law enforcement agencies, state homeland security agencies. It's a huge breadth of different types of grantees, of where they are coming from in this program.

Michael Planty [00:11:25] So of the 143 programs that have been selected as grantees, how do you get down to selected 32 for an evaluation?

Sarah Cook [00:11:32] We actually work with DHS on that. So we review the narratives that were submitted as part of the proposals of the awarded grantees, which are all posted on DHS's website. That's all public information. So we review those and look for different things in the programs. We look for variety in the type of program, the type of prevention that they're doing, the type of organization, the size of the program. Because we do want to evaluate a variety of them, but we do not make that decision solely. We can provide our recommendations to DHS. And so between us and DHS, kind of collaboratively determine which ones to evaluate.

Michael Planty [00:12:11] Ariane can you give us some specifics on what types of programs have been funded in, the ones that you're evaluating?

Ariane Noar [00:12:15] Absolutely. I think we would probably be here all day if I was trying to give you an example of all the different types of work that they're doing, but just to kind of give you a couple of examples to kind of start to show you the scope of what we're talking about. One grantee that we evaluated under fiscal year 2020 is called Life After Hate. Life After Hate is a nonprofit that works nationally and works directly with individuals who want to disengage from specifically from violent, far right hate groups or their friends and family members who may be concerned about someone and looking for support. And then for the grant specifically that we evaluated. So they were delivering these direct services, like I mentioned, connecting folks to services in their communities as needed. They did an online campaign to raise awareness of their services so that, you know, the folks out there who might want their help, who might need their help, are able to get connected with them and even know that these kinds of services exist. They also another part of their grant was to actually train other mental health professionals and law enforcement officials across the US to essentially try and build that local capacity for folks to be able to identify and work with individuals who might be at risk of mobilizing to violence.

Michael Planty [00:13:29] So Life After Hate these are trying to get people counseling services, but also connect them to pro-social behaviors and employment opportunities, educational opportunities is that we're talking about here.

Ariane Noar [00:13:38] Yeah, that's exactly right. It really depends on the individual and what their needs are. Right? Like some folks might just need counseling services. Some people might need help with employment, with finding stable housing, with substance abuse counseling services like that. Another example, that I can point out would be the McCain Institute at Arizona State University. So this is another grantee that we evaluated under fiscal year 2020. And so rather than working directly with individuals who might be associated with violent extremism, like Life After Hate did. McCain Institute is instead focused on building a network of practitioners in the TVTP field called the Prevention Practitioners Network. And so they created this network entirely from scratch during their grant project. And that network still exists to this day. You can Google the Prevention Practitioners Network and see what they're up to. And so as part of this grant, they held workshops, symposia, events like that to essentially bring practitioners together, share knowledge, share learnings. They also created a national directory of mental health providers and resources that those practitioners can draw from in kind of their day to day jobs. So again, completely different from Life After Hate. And then one more I would say, which again gives kind of another angle on this is the National Governors Association. So this is a nonpartizan association. And they work nationally with governors offices and with state governments. And so for this grant in particular, their fiscal year 2020 grant, NGA worked with four different states to develop state prevention strategies, and a state prevention strategy essentially is a unified framework, policies, procedures at all levels of that state government will use in order to have terrorism and targeted violence prevention measures in place. So obviously from state to state, that varies. But it included things like threat assessment teams, communication strategies that they would use in the event such a situation. So again, setting themselves up, setting up that infrastructure in place in the name of preventing these acts or responding to them. So those are just a couple of examples, but I think you can see there we have, you know, grantees working at the individual level, working nationally, working at the state level. You have people working directly with individuals versus trying to build the infrastructure. So again, you can really see the breadth of grantees involved in this program.

Michael Planty [00:15:57] Well, that's great to hear. I mean, the multifaceted approach to addressing this problem. Right? And really developing a community practice around best practices. Right? What works? This is where your project comes into play, right? The evaluation. Let's talk about approach to these evaluation. As we know there are different types of evaluations from process evaluation to how the program is being implemented to outcome evaluation. Is it making a difference? So in this case, could you describe your approaches to evaluation on these programs.

Sarah Cook [00:16:22] How to have a that method of how we determine the different methods we will use for each of these grantees. So we start each evaluation with an availability assessment. And so what we do there is we dig in to the program. We meet with the grantee multiple times. We look to see what data they'll have available and try to basically forecast the type of evaluation we'll be able to do. Now. I mean, things do happen over the course of the grant program. You know, for one reason or another, some data may not be able to be collected. That may change what we're typically looking to do, a process or outcome evaluation. As you mentioned, the process is looking at how that program is being implemented. What are the ins and outs, what are we seeing, what are the challenges. And we do this with site liaisons so which are RTI staff that we assign to

each of the grantees. And then Ariane and I work as site managers as part of our roles on the project, so that each site liason has an assigned site manager Ariane or myself that they can ask questions to and sort of help figure out what each evaluation should look like. Because each evaluation is unique, it's not one set of methods that we just apply consistently across all the different teams, because they all have very different programs. As Ariane just described, the ways to evaluate those three programs are very, very different. We look at what's called an implementation and measurement plan. IMP is what the grantees and DHS refer to it as. And this is essentially a very spelled out version of sort of a logic model. So it includes their goals, objectives, activities, expected outputs, expected outcomes, and sort of what those performance measures are and how they're going to measure it. So one of the things we do is we go through that in detail with the grantee to make sure that both parties are on the same page as to what they intend to do as part of their grant, and how we can use those data to either inform a process evaluation, looking at what they're doing, or if there's data that we can actually use to develop measure some outcomes from the project. We discuss all of that as part of the the value ability assessment. And then from that point on, we take the availability assessment. Going forward our site liaisons have monthly calls with the sites. We do various data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, site visits, observations. We look at administrative data, project data, pre-post surveys that grantees do when they're doing trainings or other type of knowledge learning based events. We're always looking for different ways to find outcomes, because in this successes is difficult to measure because the specific question of, oh, how many mass shootings were prevented this year is not a question anyone can answer. So instead we are trying to to help figure out what does success look like. And in doing so, what data do we have? What can we say was accomplished in this site? And even if we aren't able to develop outcomes as part of the evaluation, and we're focusing on the process evaluation, there's so much information gathered from each of these grantees. This field is so new that just learning what others are doing in the field, where their challenges are, where they have either overcome those challenges or gone around them or, you know, resolved them or not resolved them or how they feel like they could have prevented these challenges from happening. All of that, you know, is useful and included in our site profile, which is we do a site profile for each of the sites. It's essentially our evaluation report. So this is after the grantee finishes their performance. Then we write up the site profile. And then we also do a final report. And we put the site profiles in the appendix of the final report. In fact our fiscal year 20 grantee evaluation final report has been out for just a couple months, and it's on DHS's website and it's on RTI's website. So that includes all of our findings and recommendations from fiscal year 20 the 6 grantees that we evaluated, including each of the individual site profiles.

Michael Planty [00:20:22] What are their challenges to these program evaluations? You touched on some of these things, a variety of programs, but what are the larger issues you're dealing with the program evaluation?

Ariane Noar [00:20:30] Yeah. So I think I mean, of course, we've already touched on right? The inherent challenge of you can't prove a negative, right? I think also like we talked about, you know, this is really a whole of society approach. There's just so many different people working on this from so many different angles. So you have grantees with really significant differences in capacity, experience, what sector they're in, what kind of approach they want to take here, what their community is like. So what that means is that every grant is unique, like we've already talked about. But what that means for the evaluation is that we have to adapt each evaluation to each grantee to make sure that they're as useful as possible. But also, you know, being reflective of what that grant

actually sought to do and then what it actually did. It also means that the kind of evaluability of these grantees can vary significantly, right? So is the way that it's being implemented and the way that they're collecting data, as is at the moment in time when we kind of meet them for the first time, is it well-suited for an evaluation? Is it capable of producing outcomes or capable of producing measurable outcomes? And that varies pretty significantly from grant to grant. And so what we really need to do as evaluators is to be able to meet them where they're at when it comes to evaluation and data collection, first and foremost. And then after we've been able to do that and understand where they're coming from, understand what they're trying to do, then it's up to us to kind of consider ways for how we can help grantees collect more data or more robust data. Like we've said, there are just so many gaps still in our understanding of this field. It's so brand new. So there's very little empirically definitely confirmed on what works in this space. So, you know, we're always kind of on the lookout for collecting more data or better data. At the same time, another challenge that we're dealing with is, as you can imagine, a lot of these grants are dealing with very sensitive populations, very sensitive topics. So we also have to be cognizant of that as evaluators. You know, we're coming in and asking for more data or better data, right, we have to be cognizant of those concerns that grantees have for themselves, for their partners, for the participants, that they're engaging as a part of this project. That also can sometimes be a challenge when it comes to collecting better data for this field.

Michael Planty [00:22:44] Yeah. I mean, when you look at it, these people are practitioners. They're not of the research mind always. Right? And they're already tax resource limited. And you asked him to collect more data. You really want to have a business case for that, right? And not just be voyeuristic. Right? It's really about committing to understanding why it's necessary to collect certain information to really understand the impact that you're having with these evaluations, these programs.

Ariane Noar [00:23:06] Absolutely. And I think that's why, you know, we are firmly third party evaluators and therefore cannot kind of intervene in how they are implementing their grants. That being said, we try to support them when it comes specifically to data collection as much as we possibly can. We understand that, you know, some of these grantees, like, you know, data collection and evaluation is not their space, and it's certainly not part of what they had planned on in their grant project, necessarily, to the extent that we're asking them to do it. And so we try and support them in that way. But yeah, it is a challenge where I think everyone in this field at this point has heard people say, we need more information, we need more data. We need to be able to establish best practices. But what it really comes down to in practical terms, is having to build in the time, the resources, the budget, the staff time, right to be able to actually do all of this. Because this is not just, you know, a quick extra five minutes. This takes real time to think through how to effectively measure success of these different projects and to actually do it, especially in this very sensitive context.

Michael Planty [00:24:06] In general, when a third party is coming in to evaluate whether you're making a difference, you know, you're always, heightened awareness, right around that and to show that you're having an impact. Right? And I think that's just the human condition. You know, whenever you're being evaluated, it's always a tough thing.

Ariane Noar [00:24:20] Yeah. You know, it's funny that you bring that up because when we first start talking with the grantees, we really try to impart the fact that evaluation isn't an audit. Evaluation can be very scary, especially when someone's told by their grant funder that this third party is going to be evaluating them. It can be intimidating and it can

be people aren't sure what to expect. And that's one of the first things we try to do, is just sort of put everyone at ease, that we're not here to audit their details, we're really here to learn from them, and we're here to help the field grow. So that sort of apprehension, I think, is normal for most people, especially if they've never been part of an evaluation, which most of these people haven't because why would they? That's just not what they do. They're not part of research. Typically that's not what they're used to doing. It is not what they're trained to do. So it is really important to us that we let people know that this is not a scary thing that we are not coming in to tell them how to do their project. We don't touch that. That's their project. We just want to find out what their project is producing.

Michael Planty [00:25:19] Yeah, and I assume any kind of finding you have comes with, you know, responsible caveats and limitations, just like any research. Right? It's just another contribution to understanding this puzzle around prevention. So tell us where are those next steps, where are those gaps that need to be addressed and where is the future research objectives here.

Sarah Cook [00:25:36] With these grants also comes an end date. So sustainability is something that's really important for practitioners and people to use research to think about ahead of time. An example of this would be NGA the National Governors Association as Ariane described. They took what they did there and took it to their state governments. And that is something that is being implemented by the state government, which will give it legs and let it keep growing and let it keep moving. Sustainability is definitely something that unfortunately, someone has to fund things for it to be sustainable. So that's always the challenge, is finding resources for that next step. Also, part of what we do is we provide recommendations to DHS, not just about individual grantees, but also about the grant program. So we provide them recommendations on, you know, what would be helpful to their grantees based on what we've learned from spending all of this time with them. We really develop relationships with these grantees. And, you know, DHS is really good about listening, and implementing our recommendations. They take what we say to heart, they ask us questions. And so over the years as we've been doing this, the grant program continues to get even better. And we hope that continues.

Michael Planty [00:26:44] Well, that's all the time we have for today. I want to thank our guests, Sarah Cook and Ariane Noar for the excellent conversation. Thank you so much for your time today, and for sitting down with Just Science to discuss targeted violence and terrorism prevention, and our effort to better understand the possible approaches to prevention.

Ariane Noar [00:26:59] Thanks so much for having us, Mike.

Ariane Noar [00:27:00] Great being here.

Michael Planty [00:27:01] I also like to thank you, the listener, for tuning in today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. I'm Mike Planty and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Outro [00:27:13] Next week Just Science sits down with Will Parkin and Rainer Hilscher to discuss human behavioral responses after a targeted Improvised Explosive Devices attack. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.