

Written Testimony to the House Oversight Committee
Department of Homeland Security CP3 Program
Kurt Braddock
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Esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for having me here today to testify in relation to the Department of Homeland Security's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships. My name is Dr. Kurt Braddock and I am an Assistant Professor of Public Communication at American University. I am also a faculty fellow at a research center at American University called the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab. Between my appointments, I work at the intersection of communication and violent extremism where I seek to understand how different forms of communication influence individual decisions to engage in illicit political violence. My work in this area was inspired by the events of September 11, 2001, which instilled in me a drive to protect my fellow Americans through my work. To this end, for the last 20 years, I have studied violent Islamic jihadists, violent extremists from the far-left and the far-right, Irish republican dissident groups, lone actor terrorists, violent animal rights activists, religious Christian extremists, and every other ideology you can imagine. I sit in front of you today to discuss my experience with the Department of Homeland Security and its CP3 program, which has funded a project I am currently working on.

At present, I am working on a research project geared towards understanding how disinformation and conspiracies perpetuated by far-right extremists persuade their intended audiences, and more importantly, how we can prevent those audiences from engaging in violence in support of those conspiracies and disinformation. To date, this project has been a success, resulting in several deliverables for the CP3 program, including a large workshop on the world's foremost experts in extremism and disinformation. I hope that my work continues to be of use to the Department of Homeland Security, and in turn, the country.

My experience with the CP3 program began when it was referred to as the program for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention in 2020. Prior to my being hired at American University, I began working on a research proposal concerning the work I described above. I was made aware that my research had been funded just before my official start date at AU in the summer of 2020.

From the outset of the project, the CP3 program has been enthusiastic and supportive of my research. Personnel at CP3 (some of whom I will mention by name later) have been in constant contact with me over my work and have sought to help me address logistic problems associated with the research at every turn. One specific challenge I faced in the implementation of my research was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited the degree to which I could meet collaborators, research participants, or colleagues face-to-face. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic and the limitations it put on the early part of my research, CP3 continued its support by facilitating the completion of deliverables that could be worked on without face-to-face contact. Some of these deliverables included the development of training modules for stakeholders to build resilience to disinformation in their communities, training modules with guidance on teaching others about building this resilience, reviews of research related to disinformation and far-right violent extremism, and finally, after COVID protocols were sufficiently lifted, an in-person workshop on understanding disinformation and future threats.

I understand that my role here today will be to testify in more detail about my experiences with the CP3 program to gauge its value to the American people. To this end, I offer my full endorsement. Not only has the program funded a range of research that addresses a variety of threats facing the country, it also demands accountability for that research. Very few research programs require measures of program effectiveness to the degree that CP3 does. Because of this, the field is rife with pundits posing as professionals. Prominent media figures, Twitter “experts,” and backseat driver pundits have long commented on the effectiveness of certain practices to reduce the risk of ideological violence, but have provided no evidence to back their claims. The CP3 program does not allow for this kind of fast-and-loose commentary. For every question I ask, every experiment I design, every bit of data I collect, I must demonstrate whether the intervention I am testing is effective. This is a breath of fresh air in our field.

If only for CP3’s demands for research accountability and proof of intervention effectiveness, I believe the program provides excellent value. Before turning to your questions to provide further detail, I would like to thank, by name, John Wilder of CP3. He is the program manager on my project, and has been a godsend on research coordination, organization, and accountability.

With that, I look forward to your questions.