

# Guest editorial: Police and terrorism, violent extremism, and targeted violence

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With the rise of nationalism and extremism worldwide and several violent state conflicts including those in the Middle East and between Russia and Ukraine, there is an urgent need to explore the contemporary police role in terrorism, violent extremism and targeted violence. Police are first responders to such violence, but they also can be catalysts for and victims of extremist violence (Gibbs, 2013; Gruenewald *et al.*, 2016). For example, police officers were among the insurrectionists during the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol, while US Capitol Police and Washington, DC Metropolitan Police were defending the building and diverting the attackers to prevent further violence (see <https://apps.npr.org/jan-6-archive/>). This incident resulted in four police deaths, dozens of assaults on officers and subsequent mental health struggles for many law enforcement officers.

Police involvement in political violence as emergency responders, victims and offenders extends beyond the United States, especially given the worldwide acceptance of nationalism coupled with misinformation. Indeed, terrorism and extremist violence adjacent to inter- and intra-state conflict in the Middle East and the Russian invasion of Ukraine affect police (Gurcov, 2023; see also Gibbs, 2018; Pape, 2003, 2005, 2008). For example, building up to the current conflict campaign by Israel, the *New York Times* reported fatal terrorist attacks on Israeli police (Kingsley and Boxerman, 2024), along with differential police response to residents and increasing police violence against protesters (Bergman and Mazzetti, 2024). Police in the Ukraine are subjected to extremist attacks while providing police services to the public and responding to wartime attacks with Ukraine soldiers (Santora, 2023; Shevchenko, 2026).

The aim of this special issue is to advance academic conversation on the role of police in continuously evolving threats of terrorism, violent extremism and targeted violence – while also addressing community trust and internal institutional challenges. The articles in this issue contribute to this dialog with a breadth of research spanning geographical contexts from the US and Australian to Bangladesh and Kenya, focusing on police prevention and response to cross-national and domestic terrorism, violent extremism and targeted violence, among related topics. While the articles vary in methodological approaches and focus areas ranging from frontline tactical responses to AI integration and community reporting, they are grouped into four broad themes.

## The complex threat matrix: external actors and insider threats

Extremist threats can occur in unlikely places, such as the threat of firearm violence in countries where firearms are illegal and from within law enforcement. In “‘Always out-gun your enemy’: Conventional firearms, right-wing extremism, and the challenge to contemporary policing”, *Campion et al.* (2026) summarize the lethal threat of tactical escalation by right-wing extremists in the Australian context, which has some of the world’s strictest firearms laws. They highlight how firearm use among right-wing extremists is especially dangerous to police officers, considering the 2022 ambush attacks on police in Queensland. Through thorough examination of limited publicly available instructional materials posted online by right-wing extremists, *Campion et al.* expose the variable accuracy of shared information on using firearms in extremist attacks. However, the advocacy for bigger weaponry to outgun police officers arguably increases the rare but more lethal threat to police and the public. *Campion et al.* emphasize the importance of training and preparedness to counter this unpredictable threat.



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“Extremism in policing: Researching a hidden institutional threat”, by [Lewandowski and Shjarback \(2026\)](#), pivots to the necessary examination of extremism within law enforcement. The authors identify law enforcement institutional vulnerabilities and the unique danger posed when those tasked with countering extremism are sympathetic to it. Their work is timely, considering the persistent police recruitment efforts by right-wing extremists and law enforcement incorporation of right-wing ideology in the US and worldwide ([Farris and Holman, 2023](#); [Koehler, 2025](#); [Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2022](#)). As the authors note, “when personal ideology shapes the interpretation or application of the law, bias becomes institutional harm”. Indeed, recent research confirms this may be happening: for example, [Koslicki and colleagues \(2026\)](#) demonstrate differential police response to right-wing compared to left-wing demonstrations (see also [Keyes and Keyes, 2026](#)). Lewandowski and Shjarback conceptualize the disparate literature into a coherent problem in need of scholarly attention and recommend a multi-modal, comprehensive research framework to identify and study extremism in policing.

### **Intelligence-led policing and the technological frontier**

Combatting extremism requires strategic preparedness and poses unique challenges to intelligence-led policing and integrating advanced technologies. In “Can intelligence-led policing work in countering terrorism? Understanding the Bangladesh case”, [Biswas and Zaman \(2026\)](#) discuss the shift from reactive to proactive policing through intelligence-led policing, highlighting the institutional, legal and resource constraints that stifle the translation of raw data into actionable intelligence. The authors make a substantial contribution by focusing on the Global South, which has been largely absent from this body of scholarly literature. Using Bangladesh as the backdrop and drawing from 25 qualitative interviews with various police officials, Biswas and Zaman explore the challenges of implementing intelligence-led policing, generally, and especially within the counterterrorism context.

In contrast to the challenges with manual intelligence in developing nations, [Dolan \(2026\)](#) adds to the conversation about applying intelligence to counterterrorism through integrating artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) in US state fusion centers. These contemporary tools are reshaping law enforcement intelligence gathering and threat assessment. Dolan explores how and to what extent AI/ML influences intelligence-led policing practices, along with the drawbacks of using such tools. Given that AI/ML has been disseminated with rapid speed, Dolan recommends cautious and responsible use.

### **The role of the public: suspicious activity reporting and trust in police**

Police alone cannot combat terrorism. Similar to relying on the public to report crime, the police need the public to report suspicions of terrorism and violent extremism. Another theme of this collection of articles explores how the public connects with the police to report suspicious activity – and whether the public will take the initiative.

[Vitro et al. \(2026\)](#) experimentally test public preferences for technological interfaces (i.e. webforms vs chatbots) for reporting suspicious activity to authorities, examining the mechanisms through which the public interacts with anti-terrorism efforts. As AI/ML tools proliferate and the public is increasingly exposed to AI/ML tools and holds diverse perspectives on AI use in policing ([Alderden et al., 2026](#); [Ezzeddine et al., 2023](#)), Vitro et al. incorporate an important piece of evidence to the conversation. In particular, they find that interactive chatbots perform better on multiple dimensions (i.e. report accuracy, anonymity, trust and usability) than traditional methods of reporting through webforms – at least in a laboratory setting.

Moving beyond *how* the public reports suspicious extremist activity to police, [Kearns et al. \(2026\)](#) explore the influence of community dynamics in *whether* people are willing to share information with the police in their piece, “See something, say something? Examining

variations in willingness to report suspicious activity to police across racial and ethnic groups”. Their article addresses the critical human element of suspicious activity reporting, analyzing how relationships and systemic issues impact the willingness of different racial and ethnic groups to report threats to the police. Using an experimental design, they found that Black, Hispanic and Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim respondents were less willing than White respondents to report suspicious activity to police. Perhaps this finding is because people of color living in the US typically have lower trust in police than White people.

Indeed, willingness to report threats of suspicious activity to the police is dependent on public trust in police (Tyler, 1990, 2006; Tyler and Huo, 2002; Tyler *et al.*, 2010). Altuntaş and Sevgili (2016) highlight interventions aimed at repairing fractures in public trust in police, discussing quasi-experimental evidence on social-based policing programs designed to build trust with youth in security-sensitive regions. The specific program studied was employed by the Şırnak Provincial Police Department in schools in Şırnak, Turkey, where the police assisted with vocational education, engaged with students in artistic expression and collaborated with students on civic engagement projects. Altuntaş and Sevgili report promising results, with some caveats.

### Historical legacies, state violence and counter-insurgency

In line with Kearns *et al.*’s discussion of the negative engagement with police minoritized racial and ethnic groups have experienced and Altuntaş and Sevgili’s observations of negative vicarious experience with police and intergenerational trauma affecting police-public relations, in “Displaying deadly police violence against Black people through government memorials” Keyes and Keyes (2026) confront memorializing state violence by police against Black populations. Exploring 590 unarmed or legally armed Black people killed by police in the US between 2013 and 2023, they found 14 government-sponsored related memorials. They discuss how government memorials and public acknowledgment of state violence intersect with the broader discourse on police legitimacy, community trauma and targeted violence. Keyes and Keyes also connect the legacy of police violence against Black people to right-wing ideologies (e.g. White supremacy) within police culture, similar to the concern raised by Lewandowski and Shjarback (2026).

Finally, returning to counterterrorism strategies discussed by Biswas and Zaman (2026) and Dolan (2026), Ball (2026) provides historical context to counter-insurgency and counterterrorism. In “Policing in colonial Nairobi: Establishing policing norms and developing COIN response to “terror” in the city”, Ball examines how colonial policing norms and counter-insurgency (COIN) responses to “terrorism” were established. In line with some of the arguments presented by Keyes and Keyes (2026) and Lewandowski and Shjarback (2026), Ball argues that policing terrorism in colonial Nairobi largely operated to “enforce boundaries between European populations and everyone else”. Ball discusses how these historical frameworks continue to echo in modern policing structures.

### Conclusion and future directions

I am grateful to the authors and the anonymous reviewers for their scholarly work and contributions. Together, the works in this special issue highlight the polycrisis in addressing terrorism, extremist violence and targeted violence: Contemporary counterterrorism policing requires balancing robust tactical preparedness and advanced intelligence frameworks with the need to maintain democratic accountability, root out internal extremism and heal fractured community relations. Moving forward, technological and tactical advancements (such as AI and intelligence-led policing) must be paired with social-based policing and historical awareness to be truly effective and just. Police agencies should continue to seek contextualized and ethical solutions to extremist threats. Echoing the recommendations of the authors in this

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