

Scholars offer Muslims and police a new roadmap for better relations

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

January 20, 2016

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WASHINGTON (RNS) U.S. police departments must look beyond the Muslim American community if they want to effectively counter violent extremism, a new report from Duke University finds.

After surveying 382 police departments across the nation, researchers found what many Muslim Americans have concluded: that law enforcement focuses on the threat of Muslim extremists while downplaying the threats of white supremacists and other ideologically driven groups.

If police want to win the trust of Muslim Americans in battling Islamic radicalism, police are going to have to show that Muslims are not being singled out as potential terrorists, said the authors, who recently released the report, “The Challenge and Promise of Using Community Policing Strategies to Prevent Violent Extremism,” at Duke’s Washington, D.C., office.

“You’re not just asking them for information, you’re offering your services,” said Jessica Toliver, one of the report’s co-authors.

The report places a premium on bolstering officers’ cultural sensitivity.

Toliver gave the example of a police department that brought a bomb-sniffing dog to a community meeting with local Muslims as an “icebreaker.” But dogs are considered impure in many Muslim cultures, and—to many—a symbol of American distrust of Muslims.

Other recommendations for police departments include:

- Separate outreach efforts from intelligence collection and criminal investigatory units.

- Recruit and hire people who reflect the racial, ethnic, and religious composition of the community.
- Provide basic language training to officers who work with immigrant communities.

In addition, the report advises Muslim Americans to reach out to police: “Do not categorically reject all offers of engagement on an assumption that they are discriminatory or will be used to conduct surveillance.”

The study was produced by Duke’s Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security.

A prominent police chief and a Muslim scholar endorsed the report but also offered suggestions of their own.

J. Thomas Manger, police chief of Montgomery County, Maryland, and president of the Major Cities Chiefs Association, said other community groups—not just law enforcement—should reach out to Muslim Americans.

“It is a community-led effort, not a police-led effort, and we believe that’s why it’s been so successful across Montgomery County,” he said.

Dalia Mogahed, of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, called the report’s recommendations “an enormous improvement on the status quo” and urged police departments to purge themselves of “the incredibly bigoted and Islamophobic material” that some jurisdictions have used to train officers.

And she asked for parity in the definition of *terrorism*, considered among the worst of crimes but often not applied to non-Muslims who commit or plan to commit horrific violence.

“The going definition of terrorism, at least in public discourse,” she said, “is ‘a violent act committed by a Muslim.’”