STRENGTHENING TRANS-ATLANTIC CITY-LEVEL COOPERATION AGAINST EXTREMIST- AND HATE-MOTIVATED VIOLENCE
THE ROLE OF MAYORS AND CITIES: US – NORDIC EXPERIENCES

A Strong Cities Network – Nordic Safe Cities Workshop
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the Strong Cities Network's (SCN) efforts to promote more human rights-based and locally-led action against extremist- and hate motivated violence, SCN is leading an initiative on strengthening Trans-Atlantic city cooperation, facilitating the sharing of prevention trends, approaches and lessons between local leaders and governments in the United States and the Nordic region. The initiative recognises that cities and communities on both sides of the Atlantic are facing a hybrid set of threats that have only been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Extremism is driving polarisation and division within communities and the mainstreaming of disinformation, conspiracy and extremism are threatening democratic values and institutions.

As part of week-long visit to Finland by a delegation of 13 local leaders and practitioners from the United States, SCN, in collaboration with Nordic Safe Cities (NSC), Finland's Ministry of the Interior and the City of Helsinki, convened local leaders and practitioners, as well as national government officials from across the Nordic region for a two-day, interactive workshop focused on strengthening US-Nordic cooperation on locally-led prevention efforts. Participants shared experiences, lessons learned and challenges on a number of prevention-related topics. These included:

- the impact of online hate, polarisation and extremist activity in local communities
- the role that local leaders play in catalysing and sustaining locally-led prevention efforts
- the centrality of social cohesion for community resilience, national and local-level strategies for promoting inclusivity and engagement with local community actors
- building trust among community members and law enforcement
- how to leverage existing prevention frameworks to prevent hate-motivated violence
- how rising disinformation, polarisation and extremism is threatening local democracy

Following is a summary of the key themes from the workshop. Discussions were conducted under the Chatham House Rule. The views expressed in this document are based on discussions from the workshop only, and do not necessarily represent the views of the SCN – its members or its management unit – NSC, US Embassy Helsinki, Finland's Ministry of the Interior, the City of Helsinki, or any workshop participants.

Key Themes

1. **Strengthening community resilience and trust: information sharing and local leadership matter**

Participants emphasised the importance of communication and transparency among different stakeholders as an essential foundation for robust and effective prevention planning and cooperation. Open and trusted partnerships, they shared, also create better insights at the local level, establishing entry points for interventions and other preventative engagements.

Participants emphasised that transparency and communication by responsible agencies is instrumental for bringing community members together and demonstrating clarity of actions taken to address these cases. This approach allows stakeholders to address grievances head-on and enables community members to identify the agencies and actors who can support them in such circumstances.

Many of the community-level programmes highlighted and discussed during the workshop showcased the importance and benefits of multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches. Examples, such as Finland's Anchor ('Ankkuri') Model and the Danish Info-house Model, which prioritise the establishment of multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder teams (e.g. law enforcement, mental health, social services, other partners as needed) working collaboratively and holistically. These models promote a case-by-case approach, so that risk assessments, intervention plans, and resources are tailored and responsive to the specific individual. In Finland, it was noted that families of at-risk youth engage with the Anchor intervention teams on a voluntary basis, and, even in families where a parent (or both parents) may have criminal records, they are often eager and happy for their children to take part in the Anchor program to give them a better future.

There was broad agreement that the timely flow of information among different actors is crucial for not only building and reinforcing trust between partners, but also for the development of contextualised local strategies and tailored intervention plans. Participants from Finland agreed, noting that information sharing was also a bedrock of its approach, with legislation in place enabling the sharing between municipal authorities to facilitate and enable the quick and effective transfer of relevant data across all relevant actors. US participants noted the key role that Fusion Centres play as a hub and distribution centre for threat-related information among different levels of government and the private sector, and feed into a National Network, bringing critical context and perspectives on threats and a key conduit for information for crisis response teams, enabling practitioners to determine what interventions or other follow-up are required.

Beyond information sharing, another key theme throughout the workshop was the importance of – and need for – police and local leaders to demonstrate leadership, to show up, to be visible and active in their communities. Participants emphasised how crucial this was; both in day-to-day interactions as well as in moments of crisis. Many noted that the

ability of authorities to effectively connect and engage with communities during a crisis point was directly linked to and supported by the investments they made to build relationships and trust on a day-to-day basis.

Given global trends, it was not surprising to hear from participants their concern regarding the role of traditional and online media in amplifying, and often force-multiplying, the reach and impact of hate speech. Participants from both sides of the Atlantic noted the considerable damage that such reports can cause in eroding and breaking down hard-fought bonds, trust, and relationships between different communities. They noted that local police can and should play a crucial role in these circumstances, through both leadership and actions, to bring together communities and reinforce messaging on compassion, community, acceptance, diversity, inclusivity and social cohesion.

Above: More than 50 local leaders, practitioners and central government officials convened in Helsinki, Finland, for the SCN-NSC workshop on Strengthening Trans-Atlantic City-Level Cooperation Against Extremist- and Hate-Motivated Violence, The Role of Mayors and Cities: US – Nordic Experiences.

2. The importance of digital literacy in preventing extremism, hate and polarisation

There was also much discussion and concern regarding the rapidly changing and evolving threat picture; one further complicated by a 'hybridisation' of ideologies, reckless political posturing and weaponizing of wedge issues, and a series of high-profile attacks that promote and inspire. Participants noted that, in the past, efforts had focused on preventing vulnerable youth and at-risk individuals from being recruited by violent extremist groups; but the appeal of and access to online communities had significantly altered the threat environment. Online platforms, often those with minimal moderation or gaming-adjacent communications functionality, provided fertile ground for violent extremism, hate speech and conspiracy theories, and easy access and reach to vulnerable individuals searching for connection. Participants discussed how this continued to enable the rapid radicalisation of lone-actors and provide access to endless sources of inspiration, manifestos, tactics, and high-profile

attacks to serve as 'blueprints' for future attacks. Identifying individuals vulnerable to radicalisation, and preventing the planning and carrying out of attacks, is significantly more difficult and complex. Threats from lone-actors and small cells following "radical" far-right or ISIS- and/or al-Qaeda ideologies were top of list concerns for all participants.

Far-right extremism, glorified online by individuals advocating for anarchism, the collapse of governments, and attempting to instigate race wars, was a throughline in these discussions. Participants shared how groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) – a right-wing extremist group operating in Sweden and across the region and with alliances across Europe, the United States and elsewhere – remain a threat. Banned in Finland in 2020, NRM continues to wield notable influence in the global white supremacist movement, more as an agitator and recruitment driver than direct security risk. This prompted a discussion about the need to unpack further where to draw the line between the point at which extremism ends and violent extremism begins, with many participants emphasising the impact of inspiration derived from non-violent narratives.

Discussions explored how this was a relevant lens through which to consider further the ongoing growth of – and in many cases convergence of – far-right extremism, white supremacy, anti-vaxxer and anti-government ideology, and anti-Semitic tendencies on both sides of the Atlantic. Participants emphasized how these trends are super-charged by COVID-19 pandemic lock downs, disruption of daily routines and pro-social connections during the pandemic, mask mandates, the reliance on vaccination certificates and COVID-passes and other factors.

It was also noted how the Ukraine-Russian war had also further complicated the threat environment. Participants, particularly those from Europe, noted the flow of their citizens joining the so-called 'international volunteer army' to defend Ukraine (see for example, the [International Legion of Defence of Ukraine](#)). While not illegal to travel to Ukraine, participants noted a plethora of direct and indirect implications. For example, providing individuals and groups following far-right extremist ideology with combat/battlefield experience and access to weapons, and the potential of 'street militia' and patrols in other communities, particularly where political rhetoric seeks to weaponize wedge issues like immigration. The difference between a perceived passive acceptance of, and direct encouragement of, foreign fighters in Ukraine, but not in other global contexts where the fighters are Muslim, could also incite backlash in other communities and inflame long-standing tensions.

Participants cited examples of authorities discouraging individuals from traveling to Ukraine, including an awareness campaign around the danger of being captured by Russian forces and difficulties of returning. The need for proactive communication and engagement with those who have returned from conflict zones to mitigate against desires and opportunities to join violent extremist groups were highlighted.

This prompted a discussion around the importance of prioritising rehabilitation and reintegration programmes post-prosecution and incarceration. Practitioners from Finland explained their role and approach to repatriating nearly +/- 30 individuals, including children

and adults, from Syria and Kurdish-controlled camps, and working with those repatriated to reach out and encourage others to return. Participants noted that law enforcement action had to be paired with tailored rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, and further prevention-focused programming to mitigate against further ideological entrenchment. There was broad agreement that a holistic, long-term engagement approach, that leverages multi-stakeholder engagement and entry points, was the best model to support individuals post-incarceration, and through rehabilitation and reintegration.

Representatives from different cities and municipalities shared how their prevention programs include an increasing emphasis on online engagement. This can include requiring police officers in communities to have an online presence to promote visibility and accessibility to community members. The City of Stockholm has increased its focus on providing digital education and online skills training to employees, particularly educators, to improve their visibility of and skills to counter online disinformation and far-right extremism. US representatives cited the Biden Administration's June 2021 [National Strategy to Counter Domestic Terrorism](), which emphasises how extremists have leveraged the online environment to force-multiply the spread of calls to violence, and calls for efforts to limit the widespread online availability of recruitment materials and propaganda and bolstering resilience to such materials.

3. Improving community welfare: a holistic approach to prevention is essential

There was consensus on the crucial role played by social welfare services in a holistic prevention approach, including identifying earliest possible entry points and access for minorities or recent immigrants. It was argued that ensuring access to services, programs designed and tailored to their experiences and contexts, and demonstrating continuity of care would go a long way to strengthening inclusion and mitigating against the search for support and a sense of belonging in extremist communities. Participants noted that encouraging access to certain welfare services or programs – including inter alia mental health support, addiction treatment programs, and school-based prevention programs – were challenging given the stigma attached to these topics in some communities. As such, it was suggested that access should be paired with awareness-raising. One participant noted some success in engaging trusted members of these communities to serve as advocates for the benefits of these services and encouraging families and individuals to engage. Participants also stressed the importance for local practitioners to have a fully contextualised understanding of the community in which they are providing services, particularly to help address and break-down stigmatisation of such services in marginalised communities. The workshop included presentations on and discussions around how to leverage existing evidence-based public health services to provide models for and entry points for broader service delivery. Participants also noted the importance of ensuring that victims of violence and those who have experienced trauma have long-term support, including access to public and mental health services.

Participants also underscored how policies, structures, and institutions with entrenched, structural biases and discrimination can be significant obstacles for minorities seeking access

to services, opportunities for advancement, and equal treatment. Publicly acknowledging and proactively addressing structural biases, it was suggested, play a crucial role in addressing historic wrongs and is an important step towards accountability. It can also be a great opportunity for healing: engaging local communities in the process of addressing such wrongs offers officials a platform for demonstrating their commitment to the community and righting wrongs, and a project on which to actively engage and partner with the community to find solutions.

4. **Capacity-building and training for frontline workers: an effective early warning system to prevent hate-motivated and other forms of violence**

City representatives from across the Nordic region shared how they are incorporating training and capacity-building programmes for city workers and educators as a crucial step towards recognising early signs of or potential risks for radicalisation. The training programs and awareness campaigns cover examples of what early signs to look for that may lead to radicalisation, the types of questions to ask if you suspect someone is vulnerable or at risk, and which actors to engage. This approach has been included across cities, districts, departments, and educational institutions with concrete action plans informed by local and situational descriptions of challenges and threats.

While there was broad agreement on the key role that educators and educational institutions can play in early prevention, and consensus on the importance of training and awareness campaigns, some US participants noted that the extent and depth to which educators could proactively engage on early prevention work would likely differ between the regions. For example, one participant noted that due to the highly politicised and decentralised nature of American education systems, engaging educators across the United States in more intensive prevention work would be challenging.

An important discussion developed around how to engage and intervene with adults and older citizens who may be particularly susceptible to misinformation/disinformation, and which can incite online and offline hate. One participant noted that adults are responsible for a significant proportion of online hate speech. Some cities and municipalities are developing workstreams and programs to address this, including awareness campaigns on how community members can engage constructively with family members or friends who are spreading misinformation/disinformation and how to counter such narratives. There are emerging city/community networks bringing together civil society organisations, religious communities, politicians and youth groups to further address these challenges and provide training on how to counter such narratives and build community resilience.

5. **Inclusive local communities: it all starts with local leaders**

Participants shared how cities are at the centre of everything and agreed that safety begins with inclusion at the local level. They highlighted how a sense of belonging is a crucial element for strong, resilient communities, and emphasised the importance of leadership and active engagement with communities to ensure that all voices are heard, and community needs are

met. Mayors and former mayors from the US cities spoke about how they used their public profiles to lead by example and inspire their communities. Through highly visible and creative demonstrations of their support for marginalised groups, they sent clear messages to their communities, inspiring inclusivity.

Such leadership, it was noted, is also required in the context of how communities welcome, support and integrate displaced individuals, refugees, and asylum seekers. Several participants commented on the strong support provided to Ukrainian refugees fleeing their homes; many governments have adjusted their immigration legislation to facilitate and expedite their entry; individuals, families, civil society, and cities have demonstrated great humanity and generosity in offering support and refuge. Although participants agreed that this is how it should be, they noted a jarring distinction with how refugees from other parts of the world have been treated. This distinction has been very stark and troubling to those who have had vastly different experiences, and participants emphasised the need for engagement on these issues with their communities; an area that would benefit greatly from leadership.

Participants shared creative initiatives for building community partnerships and securing trust between communities and cities, particularly law enforcement, where relationships are often difficult to build. In Hennepin County, Minnesota, for example – home to the largest Somali-American population in the United States – police support engagement with community members through education programs, police-organised social and sports events, a youth-oriented [Police Activities League](#), and working with communities to plan allocation of resources and ideas for activities to promote greater integration. In Columbus-Ohio, the [Department of Neighbourhoods](#) works with residents, neighbourhood leaders and city officials to proactively welcome new community members and support them on their integration journey. The self-described 'front door' to the city works to empower residents, respond to their needs, and protect their rights. Participants noted that sustaining community trust is typically harder than building it, emphasising that with growing trust between actors there are also growing expectations that must be supported to sustain and continue to earn that trust.

The presence and availability of local leaders is essential to building trust and social cohesion in the local community. This is important for not only rallying community support in moments of crisis, and for addressing discriminatory historical/structural legacies, but also for building long-term community cohesion and resilience.

Participants also discussed the advantages of taking a more holistic approach to addressing violence. For example, rather than developing separate models and approach to address domestic violence, gang violence, violent extremism, an 'all violence' approach seeks to tackle all underlying causes for all forms. This approach could be of benefit to cities and municipalities that do not have the resources to run parallel programs, however, participants noted that caution was needed to avoid stigmatising engagement interventions for one type of violence with another.

Above: *Mayor of Denver Michael B. Hancock (left) and former Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto (right) share their experiences on the importance of leadership to build and maintain social cohesion, including in the aftermaths of attacks, such as the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018.*

Next Steps

During and in the margins of the workshop, participants identified several areas where further work is needed.

1. Ensuring local voices and experiences are better reflected in national prevention efforts

National leadership provides a structure and process through which national action plans and strategies are developed and coordinated. However, to be truly effective and deliver impactful change at the community level, local voices and experiences must be consulted during strategy development and reflected in the plans for its implementation.

2. Exploring avenues to support existing prevention models

Existing models for violence prevention continue to provide support to first responders and at-risk individuals. However, there is an opportunity to provide greater clarity and onboarding support for new workers to support that work. Ongoing capacity development and training around information sharing is also crucial, particularly in cases where legislative requirements may be known but not well understood in their practical application. Training could provide greater clarity and mitigate against any hesitancy to share where appropriate. One such example shared by the US delegation was the need for further training for clinicians on what can be shared under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA); an area which is essential for effective prevention work.

3. Repurposing tech tools and internet for improved communications on preventing hate-motivated and extremist violence

Communications in the prevention space was identified as an area which required focus and investments. With more time spent online, and (arguably) shorter attention spans, policy papers and reports attract increasingly smaller readership. Participants suggested that this could be an area in which cities and municipalities could work with the communities to develop more creative ways to deliver their messaging. For example, short videos that engage community members telling their story will likely be far more impactful than a policy brief. Participants noted that digital media has not been harnessed by policy makers in the same way or to the same extent that violent extremists have leveraged videos and the online environment for radicalisation and recruitment. Participants also suggested leveraging technology to create an active platform for frontline practitioners and prevention workers can brainstorm, reflect, and share lessons learned across different contexts and challenges.

4. Mitigating the harm of on-line (dis)information and hate in the off-line space

Participants conveyed challenges they face in countering online-hate speech and disinformation campaigns, and the importance of working with senior citizens and other adults to improve digital literacy. They discussed the difficulties in regulating/moderating hate on social media platforms, particularly when politicians weaponize wedge issues, inciting hate speech under the guise of freedom of expression. Participants shared how digital literacy training has typically focused on young people, overlooking the vulnerability of adults, who are often not able to differentiate fact from fiction in the online environment.

Drawing a connection between offline and online harms, participants stressed, can lead to a better understanding of how digital spaces can shape offline spaces and help build users' resilience. Some of the recommendations discussed included: 1) clarifying the roles among different actors (e.g. practitioners and intelligence specialists) to collectively assess information and determine what interventions might be appropriate; 2) developing and implementing campaigns that help citizens, including adults, navigate information online and initiatives that aim to develop digital literacy capacities; and 3) identifying opportunities for city governments to tap into and engage in the online sphere to help counter misinformation/disinformation with credible information and voices.

Resources

The following resources were recommended by workshop participants as useful follow-up to the discussions held throughout the two-day workshop.

Publications:

➢ The National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Extremism 2019 – 2023 (2019) by the Ministry of the Interior of Finland
➢ Study Visit to Helsinki: The Management of Child Returnees by the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)
➢ National Strategy to Counter Domestic Terrorism (June 2021), National Security Council, The White House

Platforms/Other Resources:

➢ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)

➢ RAN Policy Support

➢ US Fusion Centers

➢ Anchor ('Ankkuri') Model

➢ In-house Model

➢ FBI E-Guardian

➢ Minnesota Police Activities League

➢ Columbus Department of Neighbourhoods