Title: A Framework for Estimating the Number of Extremists in Canada

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Research Question:

How can researchers appropriately estimate the number of extremists, particularly violent extremists, in Canada?

Importance:

Having a reasonable idea of the size of the threat posed by violent extremists is a central policy consideration. Crucially, accurate estimates would allow for the better allocation and prioritization of limited resources. As well, they would allow afford a better understand the evolving nature of the threat posed by terrorism. Finally, to that extent that various policy initiatives are aimed at preventing or reducing radicalization, knowing the number of terrorists provides a baseline against which these programs may be evaluated.

Research Findings:

This study reviewed a variety of techniques that previously have been employed to estimate the size of "hidden populations" to determine the extent to which these methods might be applied to violent extremists. It was determined that violent extremists are among the most hidden of populations. All of the techniques that were investigated presented substantial practical difficulties, and none was ideally suited to estimating violent extremists. However, despite notable challenges, respondent-driven sampling (RDS) is currently the most appropriate technique available for attempting to access this population.

Implications:

Significant work remains to be done before accurate estimates of violence extremists are possible. At this stage, the real value in RDS lies with its ability to provide badly needed information as a starting point for further research. Through RDS we may be able to learn more about the networks that connect terrorist, setting the stage for future research.