YOUTH AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES

Testing Assumptions about Drivers of Extremism – What Matters Most?

Research conducted by the USAID ENGAGE Project, implemented by DAI Global, in partnership with Mindanao State University-Marawi, Notre Dame University-Cotabato, Basilan State College, Mindanao State University-Sulu, and University of Southeastern Philippines-Davao.

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY................................................................................................................... 1
1. INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................ 2
2. METHODOLOGY......................................................................................................................... 4
3. VULNERABILITIES—DRIVERS, PUSH AND PULL FACTORS ........................................... 6
3.1. CASE STUDIES—EXPERIENCES WITH EXTREMISM 6
       Southern Mindanao 6
       Western Mindanao 6
       Central Mindanao 7
3.2. A FIRST LOOK AT SURVEY DATA—PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH 7
       Conflict 8
       Community Discrimination 8
       Individual Alienation, Marginalization and Isolation 9
       Sources of Information and Trust 9
       Trust and Satisfaction with Government 10
       Acceptance of Revenge and Violence 11
       Ideological Agreement 11
3.3. REGRESSION ANALYSIS—TRENDS AND RELATIONSHIPS 12
       Support for Violence—Full Dataset 13
       Support for Extreme Ideology—Full Dataset 13
       Support for Violence and Extreme Ideology—Exploring Religion 13
       Support for Violence and Extreme Ideology—Exploring School Level 14
       Regression Summary 14
4. KEY FACTORS AND VULNERABILITIES—WHAT MATTERS MOST ......................... 16
5. POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS........................................................................ 18
6. CONCLUSION........................................................................................................................... 19

FIGURES

    Figure I: ENGAGE Focus Area and Research Locations 3
    Figure 2: Sources of and Trust in Local Information 10
### ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>BIFF</td>
<td>Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters</td>
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<td>CPP</td>
<td>Communist Party of the Philippines</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
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<td>CVE</td>
<td>Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>IS-Ranao</td>
<td>Islamic State-Ranao (Maute Group)</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</td>
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<td>LGU</td>
<td>Local Government Unit</td>
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<td>MILF</td>
<td>Moro Islamic Liberation Front</td>
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<td>MNLF</td>
<td>Moro National Liberation Front</td>
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<td>MSU</td>
<td>Mindanao State University</td>
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<td>NPA</td>
<td>New People’s Army</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Development responses to violent extremism are challenged by a lack of rigorous methods for testing assumptions about and investigating the relative importance of different drivers of extremism. This paper presents a mixed methods research methodology for addressing these challenges, and the results of its application in Mindanao, Philippines. Our analysis led to surprising empirical findings – less than half of the assumed drivers of extremism are significant predictors of support for violence and extremism, with some functioning in ways opposite to consensus understanding.

The USAID ENGAGE Project partnered with five universities in the region to implement this research project to test assumptions about the drivers of extremism in Mindanao, focusing particularly on those factors that impact in-school youth. First, we compiled a list of the 18 assumed drivers of extremism based on a literature review, consultation with experts on extremism in the Philippines, and interviews with academics and local government representatives in Mindanao. To better understand how these drivers form pathways to extremism, detailed case studies of 25 members of armed and extremist groups in Mindanao were collected through semi-structured interviews with extremists themselves, members of their families, and close friends. Next, we designed an innovative quantitative survey questionnaire to test for correlations between the assumed drivers of extremism and support for violence and extreme ideologies. The research team collected a stratified random sample of more than 2,300 youth, including students at five universities and high school students from ten randomly selected Local Government Units (LGUs) across ENGAGE’s focus area.

Regression analysis of the survey results showed that concerns among youth about corruption, human rights, lack of trust in government, poverty and unemployment do not appear to make them more likely to support violence or extreme ideologies. Gender also showed no strength as a predictor of support for violence or extreme ideologies, disproving the assumption that support for violence and extremism is more prevalent among men than women. High school respondents were more prone than university students to support violence and extreme ideologies. Support for violence and extreme ideologies correlates with higher levels of community engagement, more acute perceptions of community marginalization and discrimination, lower levels of perceived self-efficacy, more acceptance of revenge seeking and acceptance of a “gun culture,” wherein power and respect in communities is held by those with guns. Case studies confirmed that grievances based on poverty, poor prospects for employment, lack of trust in government, human rights and corruption played a limited role in shaping radicalization and membership in extremist groups. Family and community networks seem to play a larger role in guiding radicalization and membership in armed groups than any specific grievances or social and economic factors.

These findings carry significant implications for how youth and extremism should be addressed in Mindanao. Interventions that focus on corruption, human rights, poverty, unemployment or building trust in government, while important in themselves, will not likely lead to positive CVE outcomes with in-school youth. Our research suggests focusing on the most critical drivers: community marginalization and discrimination, youth self-efficacy, and the culture of guns and revenge that support social conflict. Finally, based on its central role in shaping radicalization, social engagement should be a core program component, providing youth with positive social networks that offer incentives and rewards similar to those offered by extremist groups.
I. INTRODUCTION

Mindanao has been affected by violent extremism and insurgencies for decades. More recently, the groups involved include those with ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), such as the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Maute Group (“IS-Ranao”), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and Ansar al-Khalifa Philippines. These groups operate alongside groups traditionally more focused on armed insurgency, including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and the New People’s Army (NPA). In many areas, social conflict, family/clan violence (rido), and criminality are also endemic, making it difficult to distinguish between extremism and violence due to local conflict.

Beginning in 2014, extremist groups increased their recruitment efforts in local universities, high schools, and on social media sites. In the first half of 2016, the region saw a significant increase in the number of violent incidents associated with ISIS-inspired groups. Calls by ISIS-affiliated groups for the establishment of a wilayat or province in Mindanao highlighted the increasing importance of the region to the larger jihadi movement. Local government officials and civil society organizations have expressed increasing concern about the presence of violent extremist groups with links to ISIS and their efforts to recruit youth. News reports and ad hoc studies indicated that recruitment efforts fed on grievances such as marginalization and discrimination, low trust in and satisfaction with government and poor governance, poverty and low levels of development, and a feeling among some youth that they no longer maintain control over their lives and futures.

As the situation deteriorated following the start of the Marawi siege in May 2017, several groups undertook more substantial research to investigate the underlying factors giving rise to both conflict and extremism. Research conducted by The Asia Foundation and the Notre Dame University-Cotabato Institute for Autonomy and Governance were particularly noteworthy, adding much to the base of knowledge and provided a foundation for future studies, including the study presented here.¹

Consensus opinion began to emerge regarding the set of drivers, push and pull factors that fueled support for violent extremism in Mindanao. However, clarity on this led to new questions. Were all the factors relevant for all groups, such as in- and out-of-school youth? Men and women? What was the relative importance of one factor compared with another? For programs and practitioners wanting to properly design and focus their interventions, having answers to these and other such questions is critical.

To investigate these questions in more detail, the USAID ENGAGE Project supported the design and implementation of a mixed methods research project from July to October 2017 that focused on factors driving violent extremism in Mindanao and their impact on youth. Implemented in partnership with five local universities, the project focused on youth currently enrolled in public high schools and universities in the ENGAGE focus area (see Figure 1). The research objective was to provide a better understanding of the drivers of extremism and the pathways through which youth become vulnerable to and involved

Institute for Autonomy and Governance, Notre Dame University (Cotabato City, Philippines). June 2017. Research on Youth Vulnerability to Violent Extremism in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.
in extremism, leading to better informed and targeted strategies and approaches to counter violent extremism (CVE). Findings were expected to provide a foundation for an iterative learning process and an approach ENGAGE could use to measure the impact of its CVE interventions.

This was not an easy undertaking, given the on-going conflict in much of the study area. Research staff had to exercise great caution as they travelled to high schools and university campuses in contested areas, including the Mindanao State University (MSU)-Marawi campus during the siege of that city. Interviews for case studies were challenging to arrange, and at times dangerous to conduct. Respondents showed great courage in taking time and, for some, personal risk in providing their perceptions and insights on the range of topics investigated in this study. The data is precious and the findings are critical to efforts to counter violent extremism in Mindanao.
2. METHODOLOGY

This research project used qualitative and quantitative methods to identify, explore and test common assumptions about the drivers of extremism in Mindanao. The qualitative component was a Pathways Study that explored the processes and stages through which youth become involved in extremism in Mindanao. Case studies were developed through semi-structured interviews with extremists themselves, members of their families, and close friends. Collaborating universities produced 25 separate case studies of individuals across Mindanao that provide diverse and grounded perspectives on processes of radicalization. From the aggregation of individual case studies, generalizable patterns of vulnerability and radicalization emerged that were investigated more deeply using data from the second research component, the Youth Perceptions of Extremism Survey (hereinafter “Youth Survey”).

The Pathways Study was conducted in the general locations of the collaborating universities (main campuses). University researchers conducted the interviews and wrote individual case studies in their locales. Two or more interviews were conducted for each case study to ensure diverse perspectives and to increase the validity of the results. Sampling began through the social and professional networks of the research team and expanded using a snowball sampling technique.

The second component of the research project was the Youth Survey, a quantitative survey of youth enrolled in public high school and university with ages ranging from 15-29. The survey gathered a random sample of high school and university students in the project focus area and asked a series of questions to explore perceptions of the assumed drivers of extremism. A list of the assumed drivers of extremism in Mindanao (see Box 1) was compiled through a survey of preexisting literature on the topic, discussions with other researchers and experts on extremism in Mindanao, and discussions with representatives from ENGAGE’s partner universities, civil society organizations (CSOs) and LGUs. Survey data were then used to test prevailing assumptions about the drivers of extremism and to define at-risk populations more precisely for future interventions.

The Youth Survey was conducted using face-to-face interviews following a standard set of 105 questions. Interviews were conducted on the campuses of the five collaborating universities and at public high schools in ten LGUs. Each university led the sampling and data collection tasks at their universities and the public high schools within their area. The number of students selected to participate in the study

Box 1: Assumed Drivers of Violent Extremism in Mindanao (prevailing consensus)

- Individual Marginalization
- Lack of Self-Efficacy
- Social Isolation
- Community Marginalization and Discrimination
- Islam Under Attack
- Perceptions of Employment Prospects
- Human Rights Abuse
- Lack of Land Rights
- Low Satisfaction/Trust in Government
- Corruption
- Insecurity
- Satisfaction with Public Services
- Poverty
- Revenge
- Gun Culture
- Social Conflict
- Lack of Living Wage
- Lack of Opportunity

Pull factors (investigated in case studies)

- Education Opportunity
- Income/Livelihood
- Protect Religion/Community
- Social Connection
- Personal Status, Purpose and Respect
(sample size) was determined to provide a margin of error of +/- 7.5% at the 95% confidence interval for each university and high schools in each selected LGU.

The research team selected public high schools to include in the survey using a stratified random sampling approach. First, the universities characterized each LGU in the ENGAGE focus area by risk or prevalence of extremism (low, medium and high). Then, ten LGUs were randomly selected until quotas for each risk level were reached. Public high schools having senior-level students from within these LGUs were then identified for participation in the survey.²

The research team selected respondents using a simple stratified random sampling methodology and purposive intervention to ensure that the pool of respondents was representative in regards to gender and age. The research team recruited respondents and conducted the interviews face-to-face on university and public high school campuses.

To conclude data collection in the field, each university partner conducted a one-day discussion session with youth leaders on their campus to investigate emerging and interesting findings from analysis of preliminary survey data.

² Most selected LGUs contained only 1 high school with senior level students; where 3 or more such schools were present, 1-2 were selected randomly for participation in the survey.
3. VULNERABILITIES—DRIVERS, PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

3.1. CASE STUDIES—EXPERIENCES WITH EXTREMISM

Twenty-five case studies were compiled from across the study area in Mindanao, providing a diverse array of individual histories of radicalization and membership in armed and extremist groups. The case studies revealed distinct processes shaping radicalization and membership in armed and extremist groups in each of three regions: Southern, Western and Central Mindanao.

SOUTHERN MINDANAO

The five case studies (four men and one woman) documented in Southern Mindanao profiled members of the New People’s Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). These profiles highlighted several common patterns of recruitment into the NPA. Each of the persons interviewed came from very poor families and communities that survived through subsistence agriculture. Most had limited schooling and worked from a young age to help support their families. None reported being particularly political before joining the NPA, though one mentioned the issue of land rights as his family had been forced to sell its land due to extreme poverty.

The case studies indicate that NPA recruitment efforts tend to target the poor with promises of financial support, with less emphasis (at least initially) on the political objectives of the group. Three of the five persons interviewed stated explicitly that the promise of financial support for their families was their main reason for joining the group. Individuals were indoctrinated into the group’s ideology after joining, not before. Three of the five cited feelings of self-empowerment that went along with membership in the group, and in particular rising to positions of leadership, as an important component of why they chose to stay with the NPA. Four of the five had since left the NPA, most due to unmet promises regarding financial support for their families.

WESTERN MINDANAO

While poverty characterized the case studies from Southern Mindanao, the ten case studies (all men) gathered from Western Mindanao were dominated by a different social factor: communal conflict. Eight of the ten individuals are or had been members of Abu Sayyaf, while the final two were members of local armed groups. Conflicts between communities and threats from informal local armed groups and those perceived to be outsiders form the social background in which recruitment into extremist groups occurred in these cases. Six of the ten profiles highlighted how the individuals’ participation in local armed groups had accustomed them to violence and gun culture, where respect is given and power held by those in the community with guns. The profiles highlight how membership in these local armed groups is a function of one’s family and social networks—people join because a family member or close friend was also in the group. Participation is encouraged and reinforced by a narrative of community protection.

These case studies also reveal the complex interrelationship between these informal local armed groups and extremist groups like Abu Sayyaf. For example, informal armed groups sometimes joined with Abu Sayyaf to fight against government forces that were viewed as outsiders, highlighting the fluid definition of membership in these groups. In three of the case studies, friends and family members stated that they were not aware the individual was a member of Abu Sayyaf until the individual was killed in clashes with government forces. Only one case study mentions an individual who was motivated by Abu Sayyaf’s ideology. All others appeared more motivated by protecting their communities.
CENTRAL MINDANAO
The case studies collected in Central Mindanao present the stories of ten individuals (nine men and one woman) who became involved with extremist and jihadist groups, and in some cases groups affiliated with ISIS. The radicalization pathways described here are distinct from those in the other geographic areas. For the most part, the individuals profiled here were better educated—most had at least some college education—and came from middle class and more privileged backgrounds. The common feature of most of these case studies is the central role of madrasas, Arabic language study and Islamic study groups in shaping the ideas of the individuals and steering them towards extremism. Three had problems with or were suspected to be involved with drugs before experiencing a religious conversion, after which they became very devout. In other cases, devout young people studied at madrasas or joined informal groups of neighborhood friends to discuss religion. Some became exposed to religious groups with extremist ideas while at university. At universities, extremist groups specifically targeted recruitment efforts at young people who were devout but also emotional in their faith (prone to weeping or other emotional expressions of faith).

For all individuals profiled, being part of a small group devoted to a cause was very important and provided a strong sense of community. While the majority of madrasas and Islamic study groups do not espouse extremism, a small minority do. It appears that most individuals did not seek out extreme groups but happened to find themselves associating with them due to family and social networks. One family sent their son to a madrasa based on the recommendation of a family member. The madrasa turned out to be preaching jihad to its students and helped to radicalize the young person. A young woman at university was invited by her cousin to an Islamic study group that espoused extremism. A young man arrived at university without a place to stay and with little money, only to be taken in and provided housing by an extremist group leader who led a group of students and encouraged them to obtain military training. Family also played an important role in helping individuals leave extremist groups. One case study describes how parents pleaded with their son to leave an extremist group after one of his acquaintances was killed, finally convincing him to leave and move to Manila. These case studies reveal a thriving ecosystem of conservative Islamic groups and institutions, particularly at universities in Central Mindanao, a small minority of which espouse extremism and are known conduits for individuals joining ISIS-affiliated groups in the Philippines.

While these case studies show a diversity of pathways to membership in armed and extremist groups in Mindanao, the common factor is the importance of family and social networks and community bonds in structuring radicalization and membership. That is, one’s family and community networks seem to play a larger role in guiding radicalization and membership in armed groups than any specific grievances or social and economic factors. While poverty seems to be an important factor in recruitment to the NPA in southern Mindanao, economic factors appeared to play a more limited role in individual radicalization in other areas. Also absent were social media or political grievances—few seemed motivated by corruption, human rights abuses or resistance to the central government. Overall, the main finding of the case studies is the important social foundation of radicalization and the key role that family and community networks play in determining trajectories into—and away from—extremism.

3.2. A FIRST LOOK AT SURVEY DATA—PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH
To facilitate understanding of the data, this section presents a summary of responses in seven broad categories that together provide an overall portrait of factors that influence the lives and perceptions of in-school youth: conflict; community discrimination; individual alienation, marginalization and isolation;
Box 2: Youth Survey Respondent Profile

- Total: 2,342 students
- Age: 15 to 29 years old
- School Level: 63% High School, 37% University
- Gender: 45% Male, 55% Female
- Religion: 55% Islam, 42% Christianity, 3% Other

sources of information and trust; trust and satisfaction with government; acceptance of revenge and violence; and ideological agreement. Overall proportions (i.e., percentages of respondents agreeing with a statement) are given for the full sample of all respondents. Where responses were significantly different across different demographic groups—religious affiliation, age group, or geographic location—proportions are also given for subgroups to facilitate comparison. Analysis of the data shows very little difference in responses by gender. Further, while there are some differences in responses across different areas of the study, geography is not the most significant determinant of responses. Instead, religious affiliation appears to be the most significant predictor of responses, with significant differences between Muslim and Christian respondents.

CONFLICT

Survey responses reveal the widespread impact of violence on youth. Large numbers reported that they have directly and personally experienced conflict and violence in the recent past. Many respondents also noted the strong role that guns play and the widespread availability of guns in their communities, highlighting the prevalent gun culture in the region. The results also show that many see that the people with real power in their communities are those with guns. Interesting findings include:

- 63% reported that their communities were affected by violence over the last two years, with Muslim respondents reporting greater impact than Christians (70% compared to 53%).
- 39% reported the death or wounding of a community member in violent conflict over the last two years, while 23% reported the death or wounding of a family member.
- 34% reported that real power in their communities is held by those with guns, with 58% of Notre Dame University-Cotabato students agreeing.
- 22% agreed that the only way to get respect in their community was to carry a gun, with 38% of high school students in Sulu agreeing.

COMMUNITY DISCRIMINATION

With some variation across locations, respondents generally expressed belief that local government was responding to the needs of their communities. At the same time, there is broad agreement among youth that their communities are currently under threat, with Muslim students believing this more strongly than Christians. A majority of Muslim students also felt that Islam was under attack both in the Philippines and globally. These responses highlight a feeling among respondents that their communities face discrimination and are threatened by others, particularly among Muslim respondents. Interesting findings include:

- 72% agreed that local government responds to the needs and priorities of their community, with variation across locations.
• 51% felt that their community was under threat, with strongest agreement among students in Western Mindanao.

• 48% believed their community had suffered more than others historically in the Philippines. There was divergence in responses, with strongest agreement among students in Western Mindanao.

• Muslims respondents were more likely than Christians to feel their community was under threat (58% compared to 41%) and that their community suffered more historically (56% compared to 38%).

• 56% agreed that Islam was under threat in the Philippines today, with 63% of Muslims and 48% of Christians agreeing that Islam was under threat in the Philippines today.

INDIVIDUAL ALIENATION, MARGINALIZATION AND ISOLATION
The data reveal that youth largely feel good about their lives and their ability to determine their own future. Generally, respondents believed strongly that they were receiving an education and training in school that would prepare them for the job market, and that they would be able to find a good job in their community upon graduation. A large majority also believed that if they did well in school and worked hard, they would be successful in life. However, many felt that they might have to go abroad to find meaningful employment. While a wide majority reported high levels of trust in members of their communities, they reported very little trust in strangers. These responses reflect the strong allegiance youth feel toward their communities and local leaders, but also their wariness of outsiders. Interesting findings include:

• 75% agreed that they could play a strong role in decision making in their communities, while 59% agreed that most important decisions about their communities were made by others.

• 94% felt that their life had purpose and 75% believed that they are in control of the direction of their life.

• 65% felt there would be sufficient job opportunities in their communities when they finished their studies, and 84% felt they were learning the right job skills in school.

• 83% felt satisfied with their social lives, though 69% of respondents in Sulu reported limited opportunities for youth to socialize in their communities.

• 71% reported having trust in members of their community, while 82% reported having little or no trust in strangers.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND TRUST
Related to issues of individual isolation and strength of community bonds, the survey explored where students sought information about local events and the trust they had in various sources. Unsurprisingly, a wide majority of respondents reported that their family, teachers and religious leaders were important and trusted sources of information. This aligns with the reported high levels of trust in community members. Two-way radio, local publications, and newspapers were less important and less trusted.
Interestingly, while social media was reported to be an important source of information, it was not believed to be a very trusted source (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Sources of and Trust in Local Information](image)

Access to internet was broad and regular, with 70% of respondents reporting use of the internet at least once each day. In regards to messaging applications, Facebook Messenger was the most popular application, followed by Skype, Twitter and Instagram. Only 11% of respondents reported that they were very open to meeting new people through social media, and 28% stated that they would accept friend requests and contacts on social media even if they did not know the people sending the request. Again, this follows the high levels of trust in community members and low levels for strangers highlighted elsewhere in the survey.

**TRUST AND SATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT**

The data highlight broad trust and satisfaction with government and public services at the national and local levels. This includes trust in the armed forces, despite ongoing battles in several survey locations and reports of abuses by the military. Few respondents reported direct experience with corruption in the past year. Reflecting the strong sense of family and community in the survey areas, respondents indicated very high levels of trust in family, teachers, religious and traditional leaders to solve conflicts in their communities. Interesting findings include:

- More than 75% reported having trust in local and national government, with variation across locations. 53% of all respondents agreed that the national government should be less involved in the affairs of their community.
75% of Muslim respondents reported having trust in the armed forces, compared with 92% of Christian respondents.

Despite recent reports of frustration with the military’s response in Marawi, a majority of MSU-Marawi university students expressed trust in the armed forces, with 80% of Christian and 50% of Muslim students expressing trust.

72% of respondents reported satisfaction with peace and order services, though only 32% of MSU-Sulu university students reported the same.

Family members (95%), teachers (92%) and religious/traditional leaders (89%) were most trusted to solve conflicts in communities, followed by Mayors (82%) and Barangay Captains (75%).

Few respondents report direct personal experience with corruption, with only 19% indicating that in the past year they had paid a fixer and 13% a bribe. About half of all respondents reported that they had heard about corruption in local and national government.

**ACCEPTANCE OF REVENGE AND VIOLENCE**

As noted earlier, the data show the widespread impact of conflict on youth and their feelings of discrimination and that their communities and religion are under attack. Responses also show disturbingly high levels of acceptance of violence for either community protection or enforcing morality, as well as acceptance of revenge seeking. Interesting findings include:

- 39% agreed that it was appropriate to use violence to protect their communities.
- 32% agreed that it was appropriate to use violence to enforce religious morality in their communities, with Muslim respondents (39%) more likely than Christians (22%) to agree.
- Muslim respondents were more likely than Christians to find revenge seeking acceptable in specific circumstances: a family member being hurt or killed (40% of Muslim respondents agreed, compared to 26% of Christians), theft of personal property (50% compared to 32%), and their family being dishonored (48% compared to 36%).

**IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT**

The survey investigated student beliefs regarding issues related to Islamic teachings, thought and practice currently under discussion among Muslim communities in the region. The data reveal that conservative Islamic values are widespread amongst in-school youth.

- Among Muslim respondents 69% agreed that gender segregation should be enforced.
- 74% of Muslim respondents agreed that Shariah should be strictly enforced in their communities.
- 53% of Muslim respondents agreed that older generations did not practice a true form of Islam.
- 54% of Muslim respondents reported that democracy was not the right form of government for their communities.
This first look at the survey data presents a picture of how students view the environment in which they live and the key social factors assumed to be drivers of extremism. The picture that emerges is one of communities and individuals heavily impacted by violence. Underlying this pervasive conflict are significant minorities of respondents who support revenge and violence, and who think guns are the only way to gain respect within their communities.

Interestingly, youth expressed high levels of trust in local and national government and broad satisfaction with government provision of services. While most youth felt personally empowered and capable of directing their own lives, many also felt their communities were marginalized and discriminated against, particularly among Muslim respondents. Data from Muslim respondents also indicated a broad acceptance of conservative Islamic values, including strict enforcement of gender norms, and over half agreeing that democracy is not the right form of government for their communities.

Overall, this data reveals a region heavily impacted by violence, where community marginalization is acutely felt and conservative religious values widely held—in other words, a conducive environment for extremism per prevalent causal theories of extremism. However, does our data provide evidence that these factors are correlated with more support for violent extremism?

3.3. REGRESSION ANALYSIS—TRENDS AND RELATIONSHIPS

To test relationships between the assumed factors driving extremism and support for violent extremism, we designed a statistical test. During preliminary background research, we developed a list of the assumed drivers of extremism based on previous research as well as a series of survey questions to address each these assumed drivers (see Box 1). For example, consider the factor “community marginalization and discrimination.” The concept of community marginalization and discrimination was understood to involve aspects government neglect, historical marginalization and feeling that one’s community is threatened. With this in mind, we drafted the following survey questions, each addressing a different aspect of the larger concept of community marginalization and discrimination:

Do you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) disagree, or (4) strongly disagree with the following statements:

- Local government responds to the needs and priorities of my community.
- My community is under threat.
- My community has historically suffered more than most other communities in the Philippines.

After data were collected, we grouped responses by the various drivers of extremism. Numeric values for the responses were standardized and combined to produce a compound variable for each driver. Continuing with our example, relevant survey questions were combined to create a compound variable to represent the abstract concept of community marginalization and discrimination, and to provide a numeric value for this variable for each respondent. Low numeric variable values represent a higher risk for extremism according to the logic of the driver. Additionally, we constructed two proxy variables for violent extremism—Support for Violence and Support for Extreme Ideology—following the same approach.

The formulation of variables to represent drivers of extremism enabled us to use regression analysis to test our assumptions regarding relationships between these assumed drivers and support for violent extremism, as represented by our two proxy variables. Initially, two separate regressions were
calculated using the full data set: first, with Support for Violence as the dependent variable, and, second, with Support for Extreme Ideology as the dependent variable. For the purpose of the regression, three dummy variables were also constructed to investigate the impact of three demographic factors: gender, religious identity and education level (high school compared with university).

SUPPORT FOR VIOLENCE—FULL DATASET
The regression using Support for Violence as the dependent variable shows that several compound variables are not significant predictors of support for violence, including Low Satisfaction and Trust in Government, Individual Marginalization, Social Conflict, Satisfaction with Public Services, Poverty, Human Rights, and Corruption. This suggests that these factors do not have a significant relationship with attitudes about violence. Of the demographic variables, gender was not a significant predictor, while religion and high school/university were: Muslim respondents were more likely to support violence than Christians, and high school respondents were more likely to support the use of violence than university students.

Regression results also show that eight variables are significant predictors of support for violence. Five of these had a positive correlation: Community Marginalization and Discrimination, Islam Under Attack, Revenge, Lack of Self-Efficacy and Gun Culture. This confirmed our assumptions regarding the relationships of these factors to support for violence.

At the same time, the results show that three of the variables are significant predictors but have an inverse correlation with the variable Support for Violence: Perceptions of Employment Prospects, Social Isolation, and Insecurity. While their importance as drivers of support for violence was confirmed, our assumption regarding the direction of impact of this driver was inaccurate. Contrary to our assumptions, the findings suggest that higher levels of support for violence are associated with more optimism about one’s job prospects, lower levels of reported social isolation, and higher levels of trust and satisfaction in security services.

SUPPORT FOR EXTREME IDEOLOGY—FULL DATASET
We ran a similar regression using Support for Extreme Ideology as the dependent variable. Again, results show that several variables have no strength as predictors: Islam under Attack, Low Satisfaction and Trust in Government, Individual Marginalization, Social Conflict, Insecurity, Poverty, Human Rights and Corruption. Of the demographic variables, religion was a strong predictor, with Muslims much more likely than Christians to support conservative ideologies.

Regression results show that four of the variables have a significant and positive correlation, confirming our assumptions regarding how these factors may influence support for extreme ideology. These are: Community Marginalization and Discrimination, Revenge, Lack of Self-Efficacy, and Gun Culture.

On the other hand, the results show that Perceptions of Employment Prospects, Social Isolation, and Satisfaction with Public Services have significant but inverse correlations with support for extreme ideologies. This suggests that support for extreme ideologies correlates with more optimism about job prospects, lower levels of social isolation and better perceptions of public services.

SUPPORT FOR VIOLENCE AND EXTREME IDEOLOGY—EXPLORING RELIGION
As religion was found to be a significant predictor of both support for violence and extreme ideology within the full dataset, and because core elements of the Support for Extreme Ideology variable
addressed conservative Islamic beliefs, we conducted a second round of regressions using only data from Muslim respondents. For this regression, we also removed variables that showed no significant predictive power in regressions using the full dataset.

Results for the regression using Support for Violence as the dependent variable show that Community Marginalization and Discrimination, Perceptions of Employment Prospects, and Insecurity lost their predictive power, meaning that, for Muslim respondents, there was no correlation between these factors and support for violence. The variables Islam Under Attack, Revenge, Lack of Self-Efficacy, Social Isolation and Gun Culture retained significance as before.

Results for the regression using Support for Extreme Ideology as the independent variable show that Community Marginalization and Discrimination lost its predictive power, while Islam under attack, Low Satisfaction and Trust in Government, and Insecurity became significant predictors.

For Support for Violence and Support for Extreme Ideology regressions, Gender was not a significant predictor of responses, while high school students were more likely than university students to support violence and extreme ideologies.

**SUPPORT FOR VIOLENCE AND EXTREME IDEOLOGY—EXPLORING SCHOOL LEVEL**

Regression results using the full dataset showed that education level was a significant predictor of support for violence, with high school students being more likely than university students to express support for violence. To explore this finding more deeply, we conducted a regression using only data from high school respondents. Again, we removed variables that showed no significant predictive power in regressions using the full dataset.

Results for the regression using Support for Violence as the dependent variable with only high school respondents mirrored those of the complete dataset. Eight variables were found to be significant. Five had a positive correlation (Community Marginalization and Discrimination, Islam Under Attack, Revenge, Lack of Self-Efficacy and Gun Culture) and three had an inverse correlation (Perceptions of Employment Prospects, Social Isolation, and Insecurity).

**REGRESSION SUMMARY**

In summary, the regression results confirm several of our assumptions about the drivers of violent extremism, reject others, and question the prevailing logic of how certain factors lead to support for violent extremism (see Box 3). What factors proved not to have a strong relationship with support for violence or extremism? Poverty, human rights abuses, corruption, social conflict, individual marginalization and satisfaction with public services were poor predictors, showing that assumptions around these factors as drivers of extremism for in-school youth is misplaced.

Which factors did show a strong relationship with support for violence and extremism? Confirming our assumptions, feelings of discrimination and marginalization of one’s community, belief that Islam is under
attack, support for revenge, lack of self-efficacy, and the gun culture were significant predictors of our proxy variables for violent extremism.

Interestingly, our analysis revealed that several factors act in a way that is the opposite of prevailing assumptions. Increased optimism about employment prospects, feelings of security and lower levels of social isolation correlated with more support for violence and extreme ideologies.

Finally, while gender showed no predictive power—implying that women are as susceptible to the factors as men—both religion and education level were strong predictors of extremism, with high school students and Muslim respondents much more likely to support violence.
4. KEY FACTORS AND VULNERABILITIES—WHAT MATTERS MOST

This research provides a strong case for reevaluating key assumptions about the drivers of extremism in Mindanao as they pertain to high school and university students. Overall, the findings give little support to theories of extremism that focus on grievances based on the issues of corruption, human rights abuses, lack of trust in government, poverty or unemployment. Compound variables representing corruption, human rights, and trust and satisfaction with government showed little to no strength as predictors of support for violence or extreme ideologies. The finding that those who expressed more optimism in their employment prospects were more likely to accept violence or support extreme ideologies shows that anxieties about unemployment are not a major grievance driving extremism. The same is true of poverty, with those expressing more concerns about poverty not any more likely to support violence or extremism.

This is reinforced by evidence from the case studies, where few of the 25 individuals who were profiled reported being motivated by these grievances. The case studies where poverty did seem to play a critical role in recruitment were clustered in the NPA regions, where it seems the NPA specifically targets the poor for recruitment with a message of economic liberation and promises of financial support. In these cases, poverty created a distinct vulnerability for recruitment, but not necessarily a vulnerability to radicalization in terms of supporting violence or extreme ideologies. In other areas, the individuals profiled came from a wide spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds and few seemed motivated by financial inducements.

The drivers that showed strong and consistent strength as predictors of support for violence and extremist ideas—feelings of community marginalization and discrimination, belief that Islam is under attack, support for revenge-seeking, lack of self-efficacy, gun culture, and sense of personal social isolation and insecurity—present a different picture of radicalization. The finding that lower feelings of social isolation (i.e., feeling included and engaged in one’s community) correlate with more support for violence and extreme ideologies shows that radicalization and extremism is not primarily a problem of isolated individuals who are poorly integrated in their communities. Instead it seems that being strongly socially connected to one’s community—and conscious of the marginalization and discrimination that one’s community faces—makes one more likely to support using violence in defense of one’s community. The high levels of trust expressed in family and community members and the suspicion expressed towards outsiders further highlights the strong emphasis placed on family and community. Thus, the strength of acceptance of revenge as a predictor, as it stands at the intersection of the individual, community and violence.

The fact that community marginalization and discrimination cede significance to the perception that Islam is under attack amongst Muslim respondents highlights that, within the Muslim community, support for violence is stronger among those who interpret discrimination as being directed specifically at their religious community. Muslim respondents were also more likely to express lower levels of self-efficacy and more support for revenge, further highlighting how these risk factors overlap in the Muslim community.

This focus on the community and the importance of social integration resonates strongly with the case studies. The pathways to extremism for many of the individuals profiled in Western Mindanao began
through family and social networks. Often, individuals became members of local armed groups focused on protecting their family and community from outsiders only to find themselves, knowingly or not, pulled into the orbit of more extreme groups. This finding also bears out in Central Mindanao where social and family networks are key in guiding individuals toward extremism, and where being part of a small group of like-minded individuals provides a strong sense of community, particularly in the region’s universities.

Support of violence and extreme ideology share many similar predictors in our regression model, and indeed the two variables show a strong positive correlation with one another. This suggests that while more conservative Islamic values do not in themselves make one more prone to extremism, they do correlate with greater willingness to support violence.

As for demographic predictors, two findings are significant for our understanding of and response to youth and extremism in Mindanao. First, gender showed no strength as a predictor of support for violence or extreme ideologies, disproving the assumption that support for violence and extremism is more prevalent among men than women. This is not the same as saying that both men and women are equally targeted for or vulnerable to recruitment by extremists. While women play an active role in extremist groups in Mindanao, most recruits are still men. However, a significant shift seems to be happening around gender and extremism in the region. Women were some of the early and vocal advocates of ISIS at MSU-Marawi. A group of young women who adopted full niqab, a rarity in the Philippines, took the lead in promoting the Islamic State’s cause in 2014—partly because their dress assured them less scrutiny and more anonymity. There are reports of women playing important roles in extremist groups during the Marawi siege, performing the work of medics and even combatants, though these reports have been very difficult to confirm. Our research group at MSU-Marawi was able to interview one woman for their case studies, and she distanced herself from extremists over her rejection of violence before the Marawi siege. The changing role that women are playing in extremism in Mindanao is worthy of additional research.

The other significant finding related to demographics—that high school students were more likely to support violence than university students—is noteworthy for the questions it raises. Do the higher levels of support for violence in high schools represent a rising cadre of youth who are more prone to violence? Alternatively, does this reflect the fact that only better educated, wealthier students tend to go on to university? Is there perhaps a moderating influence of the university? This finding raises important questions about the vast majority of high school students who do not go on to university and their vulnerability to extremism as they leave the classroom.

The picture of risk and vulnerability to extremism that emerges here is complex. Nonetheless, this research does allow us to deprioritize certain assumed drivers—notably grievances based on corruption, human rights abuses, lack of trust in government, poverty and unemployment—while prioritizing others, such as community marginalization and discrimination, the social factors of revenge and the gun culture that underlie persistent conflict in the region, and the lack of self-efficacy amongst certain youth. More broadly, this research describes radicalization as a deeply social process that is embedded in social relations, in feelings towards and connections with one’s family and community.
5. POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

The empirical results of this research challenge prevailing opinion regarding drivers of violent extremism in Mindanao and how they impact youth. They cause us to not only reevaluate our assumptions regarding these drivers, but also our actions to counter violent extremism in the region. In light of these research findings, policy makers and practitioners may need to reevaluate and rethink the focus and design of their programs, as well as implementation strategies and monitoring approaches to gauge impact.

Programming needs to identify clearly and understand more fully the most significant drivers and identify key opportunities for intervention based on vulnerable situations identified in case studies. Not all drivers are important for or influence all population groups in the same way. With a proper understanding of the focus population, CVE programs can move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to more focused and appropriate designs and strategies. The results of this research suggest that an approach focusing on community marginalization and discrimination, the social factors of revenge and the gun culture that underlie persistent conflict in the region, and the lack of self-efficacy amongst certain youth will be most likely to lead to successful CVE outcomes. It is also important for programs to recognize that some drivers, particularly the gun culture and the social acceptance of revenge seeking, are strong cultural symbols in much of the research area and provide personal identity for some youth. Addressing such drivers involves not only the right message, but also the right messenger—perhaps most effectively people from within the communities themselves rather than outsiders. Effective programs will provide youth with a mix of the skills, understanding and coping mechanisms that can guide them away from violence and extremism.

Social engagement is critical and must be woven into programing responses. As highlighted by our research, radicalization is a deeply social process that is embedded in social relations, in feelings towards and connections with one’s family and community. CVE responses should leverage the powerful impact that family and community have as positive influences on youth, strengthening their role in providing alternative paths for youth. Programs should also partner with appropriate networks that youth already see as legitimate, and encourage positive social interaction, particularly on university campuses where youth are typically away from family and community. Throughout, it is important that social engagement provides youth with incentives and rewards similar to, but in place of, those offered by extremist groups.

While exposure to social conflict is not a strong predictor, the importance of revenge and gun culture show a need to address the underlying issue of social conflict as a factor that provides a vulnerability to recruitment. As noted in the case studies and analysis of survey responses, many youth have been raised in conflict-affected environments and exposed to violence. This provides fertile ground for a continuation of revenge as a way of life, and for guns as a sign of strength and importance. These factors are intertwined with support for violence and extreme ideologies. The general environment of conflict and violence needs to be addressed alongside efforts to change views on revenge and gun culture.

Interventions that focus on corruption, human rights, poverty, unemployment or building trust in government, while important in themselves, will not likely be effective CVE approaches with youth in high schools and universities. Our research indicates that some of our assumptions about drivers of extremism among in-school youth are misplaced. Empirical evidence suggests that assumed drivers like human rights abuse, corruption, trust in government and employment prospects are not as important as consensus opinion would have us believe. CVE programming needs to adjust accordingly.
6. CONCLUSION

This research project investigated factors driving violent extremism in Mindanao and their impact on youth. The results are surprising, and tell us to be cautious in our assumptions. CVE interventions cannot be effective unless they are based on a firm understanding of the local social, cultural and political context and the drivers of extremism that are most salient for the target population. As such, it is important to remember that the findings and implications we present are valid only for the population studied—high school and university students age 15 to 29 years old. That said, given that a majority of high school students will not go to university, the results may have some relevance for out-of-school youth as well. The questions answered by this research give rise to additional questions that are best explored by future research. How do these drivers differ from those impacting other populations, such as madrasah students, out-of-school youth, or adult men and women?

While the findings presented in this paper are critical, the research method and model for investigating drivers of violent extremism are also important. For example, the survey instrument and variables have applications in efforts to monitor CVE activity outcomes and impact. Data can be collected over time on perceptions and opinion of a focus group, which can be used to create values for variables representing known drivers. Comparison of values from one period to the next can give insight into a program’s progress in reducing the vulnerability of the focus population to recruitment by extremist groups.

Finally, this study learned from past efforts and applied new techniques to deepen our understanding of violent extremism in Mindanao. The same tools, appropriately adapted, can be used to investigate key drivers for other population groups at risk of recruitment. They can also be used to investigate key factors affecting other key complex thematic areas such as governance.