The recent spate of terrorist attacks in the UK and elsewhere highlights more than ever what many police, researchers and policy makers have been saying for some time: Early intelligence from communities, especially those ‘intimates’ close to people who may be radicalising to violence, is crucial for the early disruption of terrorist plots.

A good number of terrorist actions in many countries have been prevented because family or friends have come forward to authorities with information that has prevented attacks from occurring. However, until recently virtually no public research had been conducted that helped us understand what the experience of sharing information with authorities was like for family members and close friends. Agencies and policy makers had little insight or evidence for what helped facilitate early reporting, what the thought processes and dilemmas for close friends. Agencies and policy makers have been saying for some time: Early intelligence from communities, especially those ‘intimates’ close to people who may be radicalising to violence, is crucial for the early disruption of terrorist plots.

A recent study in Australia was the first to develop an evidence base from which to ask these questions directly and to study in Australia was the first to develop an evidence base from which to ask these questions directly and to study in Australia was the first to develop an evidence base from which to ask these questions directly and to study.

In the UK, a current study is now underway, funded by CREST – the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. It expands and develops the approach of the Australian study through a sample of 75 community members and professional practitioners, with a particular focus on young adults, matching the demographic profile of many plotters and those who travelled to Syria.

The UK study’s preliminary findings suggest we need to re-examine policy and practice approaches around two key issues. First, sharing concerns with authorities about an ‘intimate’ is likely to be the last resort, with respondents much more likely to seek help from figures of authority within communities first. This suggests that policy needs to acknowledge this reality and work in partnership with community organisations – the State needs to show more trust in community organisations as partners in terrorism prevention in the same way it has done around hate crime reporting.

Second, reporting processes around terrorism are not clearly understood by community members or professional practitioners and need to be both strengthened and clarified. As in Australia, respondents in our current study express a strong preference for face to face reporting – they largely do not trust online or telephone based methods. This clearly raises issues about the local availability of policing services and of the training and preparedness of front-line policing personnel to receive and respond appropriately to reports of concern. It is in all our interests that this sort of research evidence can help strengthen approaches that enable community sharing of concerns about potential or existing terrorist activities and threats, to support early intervention.

Professor Michele Grossman (Dawson University, Australia) and Paul Thomas (University of Huddersfield, UK) are funded by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. You can read more about their research at www.crestresearch.ac.uk.