



FIVE EYES INSIGHTS

Young people and violent extremism: a call for collective action

Five Eyes law enforcement and security agencies are calling for a whole-of-society response to help identify and deal with the radicalisation of minors – especially online – across the Five Eyes nations.

We are increasingly concerned about the radicalisation of minors, and minors who support, plan or undertake terrorist activities. Radicalised minors can pose the same credible terrorist threat as adults, and law enforcement and security agencies cannot address this issue alone.

Minors undertaking violent extremist activities, even if not carrying out an attack, can have lifelong consequences. Governments and providers of health and other support services are already working to address this issue.

We are committed to working with government agencies, the education sector, mental health and social wellbeing services, communities and technology companies as part of a collective effort to identify and counter radicalisation of minors to violent extremism. It is important to work together early as once law enforcement and security agencies need to become involved, it is often too late.

Overview

Violent extremist groups have often been engaged in activities involving the radicalisation of young people (those under 25 years) towards violent extremism. Regardless of their beliefs, young people may become particularly vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment by violent extremist and terrorist groups.

During the height of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) caliphate, agencies saw many young people and minors (those under 18 years) seeking to join ISIL, or undertake actions inspired by ISIL in their home nations. As our threat environments have diversified, security and law enforcement agencies from the Five Eyes nations of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States are collectively seeing minors of varying ideological affiliations in our investigations. In some cases, this has included minors mobilising or planning to mobilise to violence in support of their radicalised ideologies.

Minors can often do what adults can – create and distribute violent extremist content, lead violent extremist groups, recruit and radicalise others to their extremist cause, and even undertake attacks. A minor can have significant influence within extremist contexts, including undertaking or supporting others to conduct violent extremist acts.

While the proportion of young people and minors within our respective counter-terrorism cohorts fluctuates over time, our nations have seen a rising prominence of young people and minors in counter-terrorism cases over the last few years. Many of those who are investigated as minors are also investigated into adulthood due to their violent extremist ideology.

The terms minors and young people are both used in the paper, with the term minors more common. The paper is largely based on information and case studies about minors. Five Eyes partners recognise that the issues that minors experience, for example online radicalisation, can also apply to young people aged 18–25 years and that is reflected in parts of the paper.



Key issues

Investigating minors involved in violent extremism presents multiple issues for Five Eyes agencies. These issues are highlighted below and expanded on in the case studies.

1. Minors are ‘digital natives’ – they have grown up online and are technologically savvy. Minors often use multiple platforms and applications for different purposes – some of these platforms, but not all, are of security concern.
2. The online environment allows minors to interact with adults and other minors, allowing them to view and distribute violent extremist content which further radicalises themselves and others. Online environments, particularly encrypted ones, provide a large degree of anonymity, complicating efforts to identify individuals radicalised to violence.
3. Engaging with minors is more complex than engaging with adults. The unique characteristics of adolescent development require agencies to factor in additional considerations when dealing with minors. Determining intent can be harder for minors than adults, especially for minors who spend a lot of time online.
4. A renewed whole-of-society approach is required to address the issue of minors radicalising to violent extremism. This is not something governments or communities can address in isolation. Mental health, community initiatives, social services, and education interventions can help to counter radicalisation before security and policing responses are required.
5. The ways in which vulnerability factors (not limited to mental health or neurodiversity characteristics) impact minors’ radicalisation to violent extremism is challenging. Five Eyes agencies are informed by the latest research on these issues.

The online environment

The online environment provides extensive opportunities for extremists. Through its global reach, extremists can contact individuals around the world. Violent extremist individuals and groups share material which individuals often consume as part of their radicalisation process. This availability makes the spread of grievances and narratives which promote violence a process which can take place entirely online. Individuals continue to be radicalised online and in person – for many individuals, it is a combination of both. Violent extremist content is more accessible, more digestible and more impactful than ever before.

Over the last 3 decades, extremists (including violent extremists) have adopted the internet as a vector for their activities. More recently, the development of online content and environments has facilitated the entry of minors and young people into violent extremist pathways. This is concerning, as minors are particularly vulnerable to online radicalisation. Online environments provide an avenue for first approaches to minors, including through seemingly innocuous social media and gaming platforms, such as Discord, Instagram, Roblox and TikTok. In these platforms, violent extremism is made more accessible, as violent extremist content can be created within the platforms themselves.

Minors are increasingly normalising violent behaviour in online groups, including joking about carrying out terrorist attacks and creating violent extremist content, which further complicates the role of counter-terrorism agencies in seeking to identify genuine online threats. In some cases, online influences can support an interest in targeted violence and impact a minor’s online and offline behaviour.



Young people and minors often have unrestricted access to the internet, which for many, constitutes a large portion of their lives. Parents and caregivers may have limited knowledge or understanding of these online activities. Where minors are socially isolated, the online environment can provide a key social outlet, which can make them more vulnerable to radicalisation. Mental health, adolescent development and personal characteristics can also complicate their situations and potentially make them even more vulnerable to radicalisation.

Five Eyes actions to understand the radicalisation of minors

Five Eyes law enforcement and security agencies are collectively progressing multiple initiatives to better understand the radicalisation of minors towards violent extremism. Some of these initiatives are with established partners, and others involve new relationships outside traditional counter-terrorism partners. Our nations are collectively undertaking research into the radicalisation of minors with academic experts. Engagement with educational institutions and experts is critical to better understand vulnerability factors around the radicalisation of minors and other factors which may impact investigations including, but not limited to, neurodiversity and mental health factors.

Raising awareness of the radicalisation of minors

In recent years, agencies have brought the issue of the radicalisation of minors to the attention of government and the public. Security and law enforcement agencies have historically been publicly prominent for their involvement in disruptions of potential terrorist attacks and prosecutions of those responsible.

With young people and minors, Five Eyes agencies have expressed public concern and a desire for these young people to be diverted before the threat becomes so grave that law enforcement and security agencies need to act. Agencies may take early action to understand the level of threat a minor may pose, which can provide an intervention point for earlier diversion before the threat they pose escalates. This may include diversion to countering violent extremism (CVE) programs, or support services such as mental health providers.

Enabling early intervention

Five Eyes agencies emphasise the importance of those close to minors looking for signs that an individual may be radicalising to violent extremism. This includes noticing and asking questions of minors, particularly given radicalisation to violent extremism can start with moderately objectionable material containing violent extremist narratives which then intensifies in its support for violence. Agencies stress the importance of parents and guardians understanding their children's online activities, so they can identify if their children are engaging with content online which may lead to radicalisation. Agencies promote available community and government based programs to ensure both the minor and family unit or guardians are supported during intervention strategies. Many agencies have publicly released resources about the signs of radicalisation, to provide parents, guardians, teachers and others with a better understanding of what signs to look for and where to access support and guidance.



Case studies

These case studies display some of the trends our nations are seeing in our respective security environments. For each case study, the language reflects the national terminology used for the involved types of violent extremism.

Australia – case study 1

The Joint Counter Terrorism Team (JCTT) investigated a minor (who was 16 years at the time of offending) following initial reporting they were mobilising to commit an act of ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE). JCTTs exist in all states and territories of Australia and consist of the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the relevant State or Territory Police, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and, in New South Wales (NSW), the NSW Crime Commission.

The minor was part of a loosely connected online network involving hundreds of local and international participants, some of whom shared similar IMVE ideologies. The minor was sharing IMVE documents, images and videos, and advocating for attacks on persons of non-Caucasian appearance, and urged others to prepare for an upcoming race war to ‘defend the white race’. This included discussing carrying out a mass killing offshore, posting about live-streaming a shooting on Facebook, requesting assistance in bomb-making, praising mass shooters, and suggesting the targeting of ‘high profile enemies’.

During the JCTT investigation, the minor was observed to have very few real-world relationships which consisted primarily of work colleagues and family members. He did not participate in any extra-curricular activities and appeared to spend limited time socialising offline.

The risk of the minor undertaking some form of physical attack was assessed as too great, so the AFP moved to overt resolution. The minor was charged with advocating terrorism and urging violence against members or groups. The arrest of the minor and dissemination of intelligence to international partners also led to the arrest of a person of interest offshore who had links to the minor’s Telegram posting.

The minor was sentenced to an 18-month term of imprisonment with a non-parole period of 14 months. Upon sentence expiry, the minor was an adult and was released into the community on an Interim Control Order and has engaged with CVE programs and engagement, and support programs on a number of occasions.

Australia – case study 2

The JCTT investigated a minor (14 years) who adhered to a nationalist and racist violent extremist (NRVE) ideology and expressed strong admiration for a terrorist and terrorist attacks.

The JCTT received information through Crime Stoppers, a community reporting hotline, that the minor had been actively posting IMVE-related content on their Snapchat account, that they planned to conduct a school shooting at their high school and that they had access to firearms and explosives, sufficient to kill a large number of students. The jurisdiction’s education department confirmed the minor was known for undertaking racist actions, particularly towards Asian and First Nations people.

A search warrant executed at the time of the minor’s arrest resulted in the seizure of a tactical vest, ballistic helmet and drawings of an extremist nature. Following a search warrant, the minor was charged with a number of offences relating to their use of a carriage service to make threats as well as a charge for advocating terrorism.

The minor was sentenced to a 2-year good behaviour bond and 12 months’ probation. Since the minor’s arrest, they have undertaken CVE engagements and were allocated a case manager to provide bespoke CVE support to de-escalate their ideology and behaviours.



🇨🇦 Canada

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) received information that a social media user had been promoting involuntary celibate (incel) ideology online. However, the suspect went beyond simply advocating misogynist incel philosophies. The RCMP uncovered that the suspect made specific criminal threats to harm a female student in their school.

Through judicial authorisations and subsequent interviews, the RCMP located the minor who had no documented history of violence and no criminal record. The parents stated their son suffered from a developmental disorder, but noted no other health concerns.

The minor and his family consented to police interviews and spoke openly about the situation. In addition, RCMP obtained search warrants to seize and search the minor's electronic devices. The interviews and search of electronic devices uncovered information, which further confirmed the minor's mindset. The RCMP also discovered that the suspect made many references to Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, two often revered figures in the incel movement.

The most concerning point occurred when the suspect unveiled a violent fixation and fantasy towards one of his female classmates. The suspect openly disclosed many of his violent fantasies online and more specifically his suicidal and homicidal ideations.

Following these revelations, the RCMP had a duty to warn the school and the female classmate. The RCMP arrested the suspect on a Fear of Terrorism Peace Bond, which is a recognition that reasonable grounds exist to fear a person may commit a terrorism offence. In this case, the RCMP articulated the terrorism offence through the suspect's ideologically motivated violent incel threats. The judge presiding over the case allowed the minor to continue living in the community, but with many restrictions and conditions. One of those conditions was for the minor to work with a third-party non-government organisation (NGO) focused on CVE.

In addition to working with a third-party NGO, the minor had built a rapport with RCMP investigators during the course of the investigation. Therefore, the RCMP officers from a specialised national security team (that focused on the prevention of violent extremism) continued to monitor and engage with the minor.

Current information (October 2024) indicates the minor has now denounced the radical misogynist lifestyle he once adhered to. Both the suspect and his parents continue to cooperate with police and the third-party NGO working with them. By all accounts, there have been no issues with this minor and he appears to be living a pro social lifestyle within the community.

At times, a debate exists regarding who is best placed to interact with suspects who are minors and provide a pathway towards disengagement. This case highlighted that the answer does not need to be binary. All partners including, but not limited to: the RCMP, the third-party NGO, educational institute, justice system, and family, had a part to play.

🇳🇿 New Zealand – case study 1

The New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) received information about a possible New Zealand-based account that had been engaging in violent rhetoric on what the New Zealand Government terms 'white identity extremist' social media groups. The individual made racist, misogynistic and anti-authority comments, as well as statements indicating a desire to die or commit suicide. Separately, a minor's family member believed that the minor was being groomed online by an adult who appealed to the minor's religious identity and lack of a strong male figure in their life. The user of the account was eventually identified as a New Zealand-based minor. This was confirmed by police analysis.

Police engagement with the minor's family member provided insight into potential vulnerabilities which may have explained their radicalisation. This included family issues, indications of neurodivergence, and isolation.

In an effort to disengage the minor from concerning activity, their family enrolled them in a youth group, restricted their time online and confiscated concerning items which family members had noticed they were more openly using around the house. Police continued to engage with the family to provide support for their efforts to disengage the minor.

NZSIS closed its security investigation as it assessed the minor had limited intent and capability to conduct an act of ideologically motivated violence.



New Zealand – case study 2

A minor came to law enforcement and security service attention following online threats to blow up a prominent building and places of worship. A formal investigation was commenced following indications the minor held a violent extremist ideology and had a desire to kill specific people. Reporting also indicated that the minor was participating in online groups espousing a wide range of ideologies, and was in contact with overseas-based individuals of concern. The minor was arrested and charged with offences related to the threats to kill specific individuals.

Following the minor's arrest, they were placed in a government-run care home for people under 18 years of age. The minor was also accepted into a young person's disengagement program where they were provided with a variety of support services.

The minor's wrap-around support aimed to address issues which were impacting their mental health, inter personal relationships, identity struggles, and lapses in education or employment. While there were setbacks including leaving education, committing non-national security-related crime, and initial difficulty in getting the family to engage with support services, the minor actively participated in the process and was phased out after spending just over a year in the program.

United Kingdom – case study 1

UK Counter Terrorism Policing (CTP) Wales investigated racist and extreme right-wing graffiti and other damage offences at various locations around South Wales, in the summer and autumn of 2022. Community tensions increased as a result, particularly in the Port Talbot area, where one of the offences involved the daubing of extreme right-wing insignia on the Windrush Memorial of a local woman who had died in the pandemic.

CTP Wales Investigations quickly identified 2 minors (17 years and 15 years) from the local area. They were arrested for criminal damage offences first, and during their initial interviews, both made a number of admissions and were bailed for further inquiries. Their electronic devices were seized and subsequently examined. On examination of huge volumes of digital media, it became clear that the 17-year-old in particular was breaching terrorism laws. Neither male had criminal convictions.

Through evidence gathered from their electronic devices, it was clear that both males had developed extreme views before they came into contact with each other. They said in an interview that they met in an Instagram group chat before making contact via Telegram on a one-to-one basis from May 2022. They shared their views online and met in person shortly afterwards when they became close friends over a period of 6 months. They lived approximately 20 miles away from each other and met in various parts of South Wales to commit the offences.

Following an extensive investigation of huge volumes of digital media and 'real-world' offending, both were arrested for terrorism offences. The 17-year-old was subsequently charged with numerous Terrorism Act and other offences. He pleaded guilty at Crown Court and was sentenced to 19 months in youth custody. The 15 year-old was charged with a number of racially and homophobically aggravated criminal damage offences and was given a 2-year Criminal Behaviour Order and a one-year Youth Rehabilitation Order.

United Kingdom – case study 2

UK CTP initiated an investigation after receiving information that a minor of school age was engaged in Islamist extremist online activity. Specialist counter-terrorism officers investigated the individual for possible terrorism offences.

A decline in the minor's mental health (suicidal ideation) increased the risk in the investigation and clearly raised safeguarding concerns. UK CTP officers executed a search warrant at the minor's address.

During the course of the search, the minor's phone was seized and subsequently examined. Some alarming content was found on the minor's phone of a pro-ISIL nature. Officers also noted the vulnerability of the minor who displayed signs of possible autism, although undiagnosed. This further opened the possibility of targeted grooming for radicalisation, so Children's Services were informed.



United Kingdom – case study 2 (cont.)

The minor was interviewed about the contents found on his phone. He had encouraged and glorified terrorist violence and had accessed violent extremist literature, but there was also a belief that the minor had been in contact with, and been groomed for radicalisation online by, the group al-Muhajiroun and an ISIL member. Officers also identified concerns around isolation, as the minor stated that he did not have many friends.

Following the Senior Investigating Officer's review of the investigation and case disposal, the minor was referred to 'Prevent'. Rather than charge the minor with terrorism offences, police decided the minor should be offered support through the Channel Program with an Intervention Provider to examine his beliefs and, if required, offer an alternative narrative. The Channel Program accepted this case and an intervention provider began work with the minor.

The minor had been exposed to a great deal of extremist material and the level of indoctrination and radicalisation was high. To mitigate the extremist narrative he had been exposed to, a significant number of interventions were completed with the minor, where he was shown alternative ways of fulfilling his religious desires.

The minor made progress through a large number of Intervention Provider sessions, concentrating on supporting him emotionally and spiritually, especially through his academic exams. Sessions focused on problematic theology and ideology. Topics were covered repeatedly to gauge whether or not the minor was remorseful or showing false compliance. Intervention sessions had some positive impacts.

United States

On 10 May 2021, local police in Arizona arrested a 14-year-old US person on state terrorism charges involving the construction of an improvised explosive device (IED) and the online dissemination of IED-making instructions. During the execution of the federal search warrant at the minor's residence, law enforcement located one fully constructed IED, one partially constructed IED, and a box of parts for the construction of additional devices. The minor admitted to disseminating the instructions used to build the IED, which were from the 'How to make a bomb in the kitchen of your Mom' article in the first issue of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Inspire magazine, to other individuals online.

Following the minor's arrest, they were sentenced to a minimum of 18 months in an Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections facility, not to exceed the minor's 18th birthday. The minor was released from the detention facility in July 2023 and is currently required to meet all conditions of their supervised release.

Conclusion

These case studies highlight the challenges of minors in counter-terrorism. Minors can pose the same credible terrorist threat as adults, with some minors attracted to violent extremist content and ideologies – especially online. Law enforcement and security agencies intervene when there is a potential threat to public safety, but these disruptions are not the only response to this issue. Several of the case studies demonstrate that diversion and CVE programs can make a difference.

Protecting our nations and young people from violent extremism is a shared responsibility. Five Eyes law enforcement and security agencies call for a renewed whole-of-society response to help identify and deal with the radicalisation of minors, and minors involved in violent extremist activities. There is a role to play for law enforcement, security and government agencies, the education sector, mental health and social well-being services, communities, and technology companies.



Further resources

For more information about understanding radicalisation and where to go for support, refer to the links below.

Australia

Living Safe Together is an Australian Government initiative designed to protect and empower our communities against all forms of violent extremism, found at www.livingsafetogether.gov.au.

The website explains what violent extremism is, how to recognise signs of violent extremism and what you can do about it.

If you have witnessed or suspect terrorist activity, call or email the 24/7 National Security Hotline on 1800 123 400 or hotline@nationalsecurity.gov.au (for calls outside Australia use +61 1300 123 401). All reports are handled confidentially and can be made anonymously. In an emergency, call 000.

Canada

The RCMP along with municipal police agencies throughout Canada proactively work to disengage individuals identified as being on a pathway to violence. The RCMP conducts disengagement efforts in conjunction with civilian (non-police) CVE groups.

To learn more or to see a list of CVE groups in your area please visit: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/bt/cc/pip-en.aspx>.

To report a non-emergency National Security offence please reference: The RCMP National Security tip line: 1-800-420-5805, <https://rcmp.ca/en/federal-policing/national-security/national-security-information-network> or CSIS' reporting line: 613-993-9620, <https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/reportingnational-security-information.html>.

New Zealand

A New Zealand-specific guide on the indicators of violent extremism can be found at www.nzsis.govt.nz/assets/NZSIS-Documents/Know-the-signs.pdf.

To report your concerns, you can tell NZSIS through an online report at providinginformation.nzsis.govt.nz, tell Police through an online report at 105.police.govt.nz or by calling 105, or phone Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111. All reports are handled confidentially.

United Kingdom

ACT Early is the UK's best resource for understanding radicalisation, learning the signs to spot, and advice on where to turn for help. Developed by Counter Terrorism Policing, ACT Early is designed to help friends and family of children and young people understand the risk extremist grooming poses, and offers confidential advice on how to protect your loved ones.

If you've seen or heard something that could potentially be related to terrorism, trust your instincts and report it at www.gov.uk/ACT. Your actions could save lives.

United States

The US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators booklet provides a catalogue of observable behaviours that could signal whether individuals or groups are pursuing ideologically motivated violent extremism activities. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/Mobilization_Indicators_Booklet_2021.pdf.

To report concerns, please visit <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us> for detailed information for the FBI's local and international office. You can also submit a tip online at tips.fbi.gov and provide information on select major cases to 1-800-CALL-FBI (225-5324).

Additional information regarding how to report suspicious activity and protect the community is available via the following resources:

- The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative is a joint collaborative effort by the US Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and law enforcement partners. <https://www.dhs.gov/nationwide-sar-initiative-nsi>
- The Department of Homeland Security offers security resources for businesses and communities. <https://www.cisa.gov/topics/physical-security>.

The information in this paper is current as at October 2024.