

Beyond

Paw Print with Graduation Capromising Practices:

Examining
Root Causes
of Online
Radicalization



HUMANE
CANADA.
ANIMAUX
CANADA.



“Lack of belonging, lack of hope and lack of purpose”

This report explores emerging forms of online radicalization affecting Canadian youth, emphasizing violent, misogynistic, and nihilistic online networks that target boys and young men while increasingly harming girls and young women; and the role that animal abuse plays as an often-overlooked red flag.

CONTENT WARNING

This report contains material that may be distressing, triggering, or emotionally challenging for some readers.

It includes discussion of online radicalization and extremist ideologies, misogyny and toxic masculinity, gender-based violence, and the exploitation and harm of children and youth, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM), grooming, sextortion, coercive manipulation and control, and sexual violence. The report also references suicide, self-harm, and mental health challenges, as well as social isolation and trauma.

Additional content includes descriptions of violence, violent extremism, hate-based ideologies, terrorism, school shootings, organized criminal activity online, and the normalization of aggression and abuse in digital environments. It also addresses animal abuse and torture, including cases of severe cruelty used in the context of coercion, desensitization, and online communities.

Further themes include psychological manipulation, exploitation of vulnerable populations, objectification of women and animals, and systemic violence. Some sections reference real-world cases and abuse-related legal contexts, including violent and exploitative networks operating through online platforms.

Readers are encouraged to engage with this material at their own pace and to take breaks or seek support if needed.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research study examines emerging forms of online radicalization affecting Canadian youth, with a particular focus on the growing presence of violent, misogynistic, and nihilistic online networks that target and recruit boys and young men, while increasingly drawing in and harming girls and young women. Through qualitative survey responses from 26 professionals and interviews with five partner organizations, the study identifies concerning patterns of escalating online violence, early signs of harmful ideologies, and the role of animal abuse as an often-overlooked red flag within these digital spaces.

Findings show that violent online behaviours commonly begin around age 11, intensify during adolescence, and are deeply intertwined with social isolation, trauma, mental health struggles, and algorithm-driven exposure to harmful content. Participants stressed that these dynamics are exacerbated by online communities that offer a false sense of belonging while normalizing aggression, misogyny, animal torture, and coercive manipulation. Notably, while extremist and nihilistic online spaces disproportionately target boys, a significant number of girls are also becoming involved, both as victims and, in some cases, as perpetrators within these violent networks.





Interviewees consistently emphasized that animal harm is a critical indicator of broader risk, often used by violent groups to desensitize youth, establish dominance, and accelerate radicalization. Despite being a key warning sign, it remains frequently ignored unless explicitly identified. The study also highlights substantial gaps in platform accountability, with unregulated algorithms and cross-platform luring enabling rapid desensitization to harmful behaviours. Participants identified promising interventions centered on empathy-building, early prevention, and community connection, particularly noting the value of animal-assisted education as an upstream tool to foster empathy and counteract desensitization. Strengthening digital literacy, regulating harmful online environments, empowering trained facilitators, and creating positive online and offline spaces for connection emerged as essential components of a comprehensive prevention strategy.

Overall, this report underscores a growing public safety and public health concern: **the normalization of violence in online spaces and the vulnerability of youth to radicalization.** Coordinated, cross-sector responses that include stronger regulatory measures for technology companies, early empathy-focused education with or without animals, and community-based supports that meet youth where they're at are needed to protect young people and disrupt the pathways that lead to violence, exploitation, and harm.



INTRODUCTION

Humane Canada is the federation of humane societies and SPCAs, representing more than 50 member organizations in all 10 provinces and two territories. As Canada's voice for animal welfare, we work together to end animal cruelty, protect animals, and promote their humane treatment, which includes keeping families together. Humane Canada's Justice and Legislative Affairs (JLA) program advocates for improvements to the government and justice system's response to animal abuse and the Violence Link, which is the evidence-based link between animal abuse and human abuse.

Despite increasing recognition of the Violence Link and evidence illustrating that better outcomes are achieved when stakeholders are educated on this link and work collaboratively across sectors, there is a lack of understanding and collaboration among key professionals. In order to address this, Humane Canada launched the JLA program in 2020 which integrates the Canadian Violence Link Coalition (CVLC) and the National Centre for the Prosecution of Animal Cruelty (NCPAC).

The CVLC brings together stakeholders from women's shelters, animal enforcement, prosecutors and other sectors interested in addressing the Violence Link. Included under the CVLC umbrella is the Promising Practices project, which this project is an extension of. Promising Practices seeks to involve men and boys as partners in preventing gender-based violence (GBV) by delivering innovative, community-driven, humane education that could potentially counteract harmful online ideologies like those found in "manosphere" or "incel" groups that are often anti-feminist, misogynistic and extremist in their views. Engagement with these groups can escalate into violence, typically towards women, and engagement with nihilistic online networks.





The “manosphere” refers to the network of online spaces where men’s rights and misogynistic views are discussed, shared, and often promoted.¹ Incel or ‘involuntary celibate’ communities are online groups consistently of mostly men and boys who are resentful toward women and blame them for their own inability to find a partner.² These groups are harmful in that they can lead to interest in more extremist content from far-right hate groups or nihilistic violent online networks, which puts them at a higher risk of engaging in violence which includes animal torture and abuse. Some scholars point to evidence that this belief system extends to sexism and speciesism where adherents see women and animals as objects for their consumption and control.³ Objectification of women and animals contributes to gender-based violence⁴ in that some perpetrators of abuse do not see them as equals or even living beings.

The NCPAC is a community of prosecutors and allied professionals from across Canada who work collaboratively to support the effective and efficient prosecution of animal welfare offences with the goal of achieving appropriate, consistent, and proportional outcomes. Humane Canada assists this work by maintaining the NCPAC resource centre which includes a catalogue of resources to assist crowns in prosecution of animal abuse cases, as well as an up-to-date case law database including summaries of over 600 cases from across Canada pertaining to both federal and provincial/territorial animal abuse laws.





THE ISSUE

It is through this work that we were first alerted to the connection between animal abuse and violent online nihilistic and extremist groups. In October 2025, Humane Canada hosted a presentation from members of the RCMP's Ideologically Motivated Criminal Intelligence Team (IMCIT) who have been collecting research on violent online groups and networks that have proliferated on the Internet over the past few years. From this presentation, we learned that there are four main ideological categories that dominate this landscape: anti-government/authority, xenophobic motivated by racial or ethnic grievances, gender or identity-driven who focus on gender identity or orientation, and other grievance-driven and ideologically motivated criminality (such as anti-abortion). The RCMP reported that animal torture material is often found within occult accelerationist networks and nihilistic violent networks, which fall under the xenophobic category, where individuals and groups create and solicit animal torture content and share it to desensitize themselves and others to sadist, extreme violence.



Group members will use personal information and content collected from victims to coerce them into creating and sharing content with acts of violence such as animal torture and sexual abuse, child sexual abuse and self-harm, which is then used to further extort them into producing more extreme content. Content depicting animal torture, child sexual abuse, and human gore is shared as a recruitment tool as well as for vetting new members using the principle of 'mutually assured destruction', where both sides possess material that could equally damage the other.



People with a sexual interest in children have become drawn to these networks because of the child sexual exploitation material and their minor members. The network and groups are also popular with other paraphilics, some of whom create professional gore content like animal crush and other zoosadist videos for sale on Telegram. Groups in the network require individuals to commit acts of criminality as conditions of gaining membership, which often include animal torture, extortion, or acts of violence. An example of this can be found in a recent Winnipeg case where a couple received a 12-year prison sentence and lifetime animal prohibition order for torturing more than 90 animals⁵ to create animal crush videos that they made available for sale through a Telegram group which required members to produce animal torture videos⁶ to gain access.





764 AND ‘THE COM’

The most well-known of these nihilistic groups is 764, which is part of the broader Com/764 network. In this network that operates primarily on Discord and Telegram, individuals and groups seek out vulnerable young people to exploit them after first grooming them to build trust and connection. This begins a cycle of abuse that follows a specific pattern that can be difficult to break out of.

The Canadian Anti-Hate Network recreated the cycle of abuse using copies of guides found online that had been created by originating members of the Com and 764 networks to assist members in identifying and exploiting victims⁷, along with court documents, chat logs, and research into these groups.



THE CYCLE OF ABUSE**1. PREPARATION**

Individuals looking to participate in what their documents refer to as “sextortion” will often prepare to commit these actions. This can include obtaining mobile phones, computers, and applications specifically for the purpose of collecting data for blackmailing their victims and protecting their identity from law enforcement. Some extorters will create extensive fake identities on social media in order to further appeal to and entrap their targets.



THE CYCLE OF ABUSE CONT'D

2. IDENTIFICATION

Victims are targeted through online games and online communities of vulnerable people — like those who already engage in self-harm or struggle with eating disorders. The victims are typically children and primarily girls.

3. GROOMING

Victims are subject to intense affection and praise, often referred to as love bombing. The victim may be told that they and their extorter are in a relationship. This period is used to learn personal information about the subject. As trust is established, victims are shown violent and sexual content meant to desensitize them.

4. SOLICITING EXPLICIT MATERIAL

The extorter will have their victim share compromising images of themselves, oftentimes CSAM or images of them committing self-harm. The victim is threatened with the images being sent to their family members and friends if they do not continue to provide new images.

5. ESCALATION

Victims are coerced into committing increasingly degrading acts like cutting, overdosing on drugs, harming animals, and recruiting other victims.





A screenshot taken from one of these guides indicates how to assess victims:

“The best woman to target are the ones that have depression or mentally ill ones, that cut for the joy of it remember these woman [sic] are pure assets and once they have done everything you’ve wanted and they are useless, throw them away as they are now useless.”⁹

This demonstrates how targets of this form of violence are often girls or young women, particularly those who are vulnerable due to mental health-related issues. A recent report by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection indicates that of the 127 reports of extreme online violence received by their organization through [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca) and [NeedHelpNow.ca](https://www.needhelpnow.ca) from June 2022 to December 2025, 70 were made in the past twelve months and girls accounted for 84% of victims when the gender was known.¹⁰





The patterns of grooming found here are similar to the processes used by perpetrators of abuse to groom children for sexual exploitation.¹¹ The techniques are also similar to coercive control dynamics found in relationship abuse. Animal abuse and sexual exploitation are used in these grooming processes either as tools for desensitization to sexual contact or as tools to establish dominance by threatening to or actually harming the animal, or by simply disappearing the animal from a victim's life. These relationships are not based on love or affection, but power and control.

Humane Canada has been deeply involved in advancing animal protections under criminal law as they are often victims of violence and sexual abuse. Our contacts with law enforcement and prosecutors through the CVLC and NCPAC have both reported a rise in the frequency and severity of animal abuse, with reports showing more extreme behaviours and increasingly younger perpetrators which underscores the urgency of this research. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of emerging trends, risk factors and possible intervention strategies related to online radicalization and early signs of normalized violence in boys and young men, who are increasingly targeted online, including how these behaviours develop so we can more effectively address online radicalization toward violence.



METHODOLOGY



THE SURVEY

Questions for the survey were uploaded to the Qualtrics XM online survey platform. It began with an informed consent question confirming that respondents wished to participate in this research, asked if respondents wished to be contacted regarding the 30-minute interview and basic demographic questions.

Seven survey questions began with the type of rhetoric that respondents had observed online from boys and young men that respondents had observed, the nature of the rhetoric and what age groups were responsible. The survey then asked for respondent feedback about factors that could be contributing to this and what strategies might be most useful to address or counteract violent radicalization, and if they did not consider those strategies useful to explain their answer. At the conclusion of the survey, we asked whether respondents had witnessed violence online exhibited by girls or young women, despite most violence being reported as a gendered phenomenon that focuses on boys or young men.

Most of these questions encouraged respondents to add further context based on their own experiences.





SURVEY DISTRIBUTION

Five Canadian organizations whose work supports or studies the challenges for youth online were invited to participate by distributing the anonymous link to a short (20-minute) survey on whether they are seeing signs of online radicalization or harmful ideologies in their work—such as those found in the “manosphere,” incel groups, hate groups, or nihilistic violent networks—that may increase risks of violence, including harm to animals. These organizations include federal law enforcement units that study or collect data on criminal behaviour online; Next Gen Men, a nonprofit whose work is dedicated to changing how the world sees, acts and thinks about masculinity;¹² PREVNet, a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to preventing youth interpersonal violence;¹³ WiseGuyz, a program based at Calgary’s Centre for Sexuality that helped boys and young men find positive, inclusive ways of being male-identified today in the region since 2010, and began expanding the program out to schools and community sites nationally in 2018;¹⁴ and the John Howard Society of Ottawa, an organization with a strong history of helping individuals and families who are at risk of, or have come into, conflict with the law.¹⁵





Organizations were invited to share the survey link within their professional networks, while Humane Canada shared it on LinkedIn as well as with members of the CVLC and NCPAC, which resulted in responses from the prosecutorial community involved in youth criminal justice, women's shelters and other agencies supporting at-risk youth.

Survey-distributing organizations were also invited to contribute further insights into intervention and prevention strategies in a 30-minute virtual interview. An honorarium was provided to these organizations in recognition of their partnership in this project.

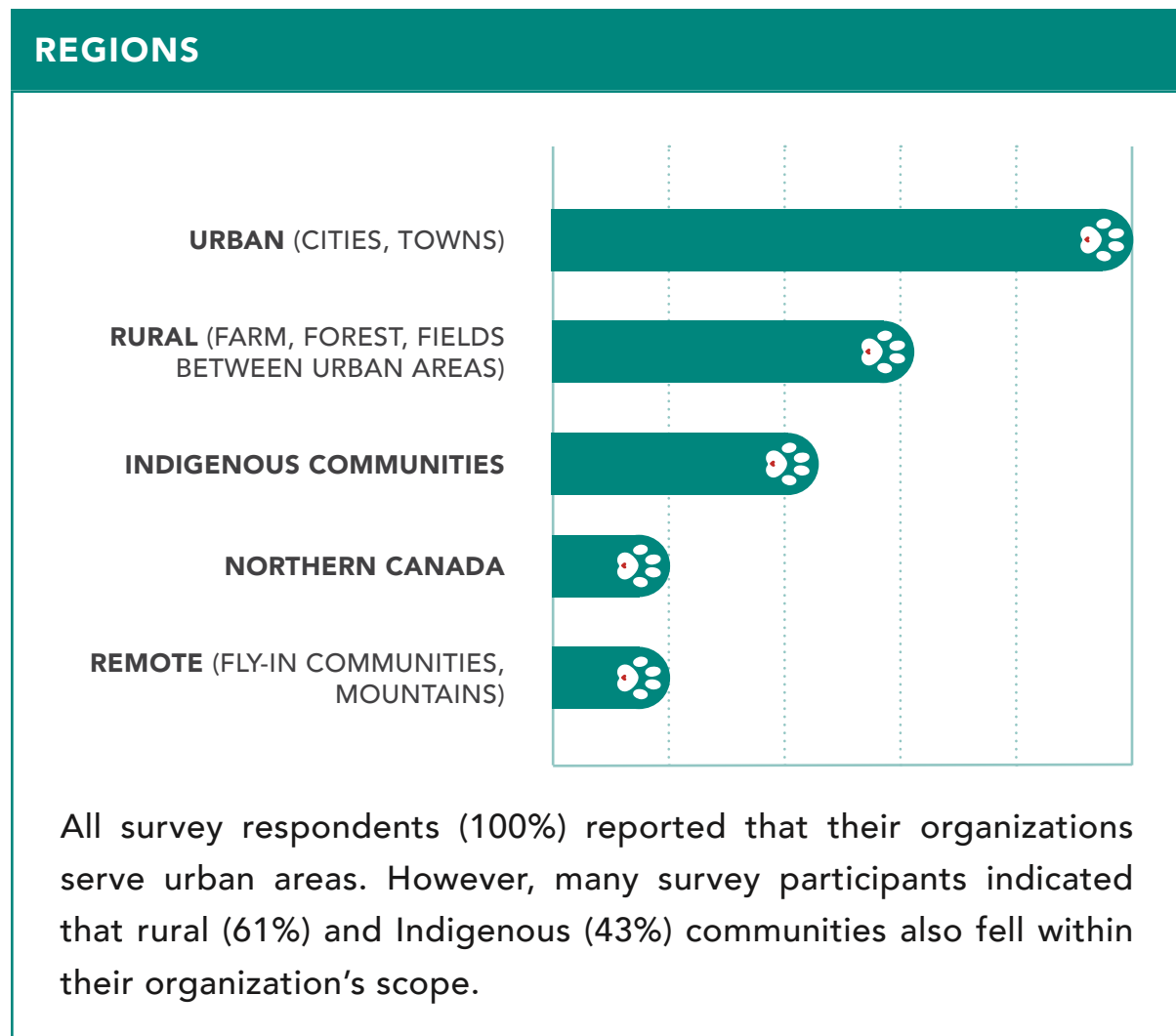
The survey received 26 complete responses, including qualitative data, and six individuals from five organizations were interviewed. Despite the small sample size, the qualitative data generated from the survey responses and the interviews has been incredibly insightful due to the diversity of professional perspectives involved.



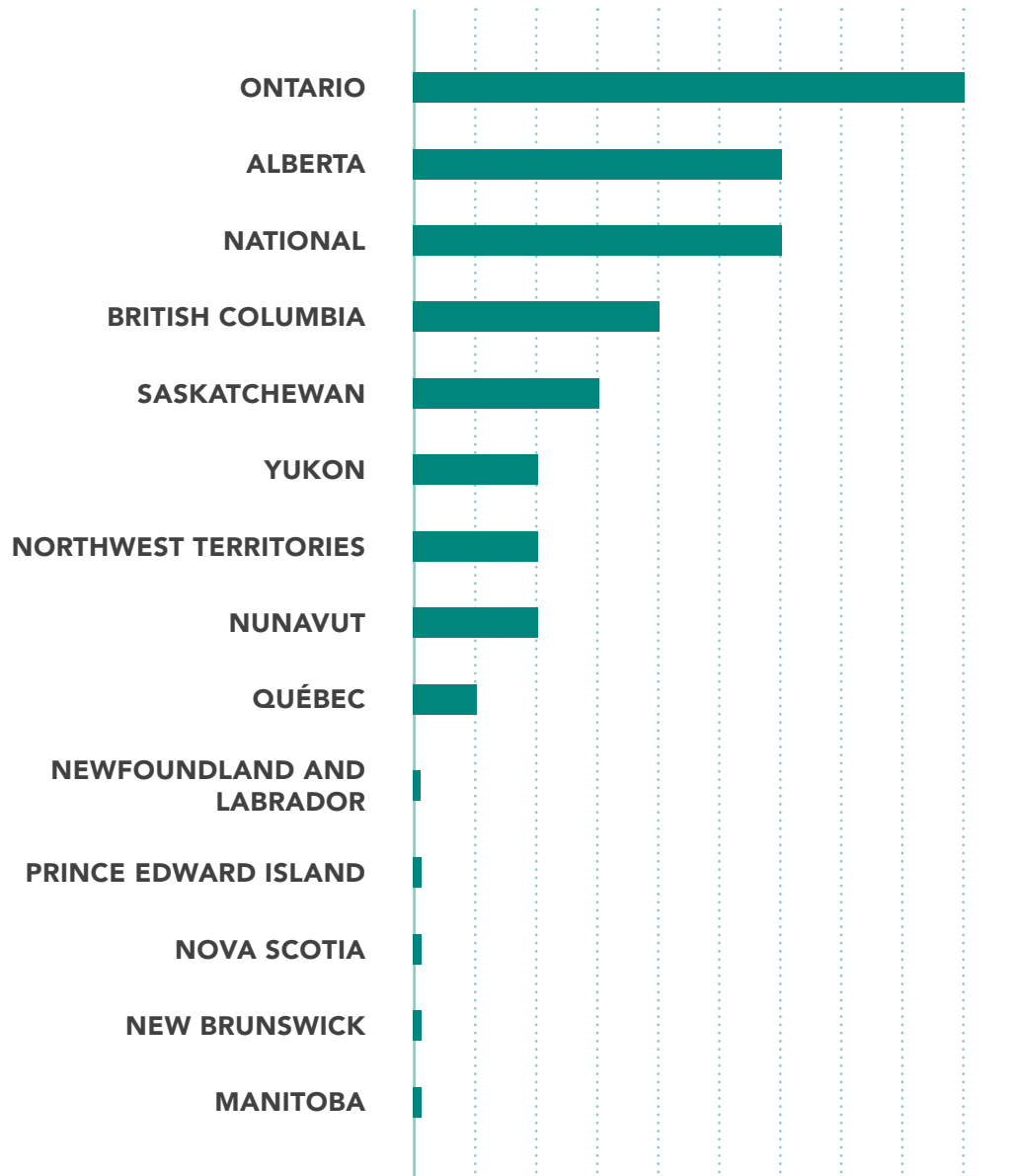
SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Respondents were asked about their organization affiliation (optional), which provinces their organizations served or whether they were national and in what regions they offered services: urban, rural, remote, Indigenous communities, and Northern Canada.

Organizations that respondents listed include John Howard Society, Covenant House Toronto, PERIL, Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS), the Ministry of the Attorney General (Ontario) and members of law enforcement.



PROVINCES



Most of the responses came from organizations that served Ontario, followed by Alberta and national organizations.

Interviewees we spoke with came from Alberta and Ontario, with four representing organizations with a national focus and one with a region-specific mandate.



SURVEY RESULTS



The initial question set the tone of the survey for respondents. Of the responses received, 80% felt that this rhetoric has become more violent and/or aggressive over the past five years.

1. Over the past five years, have you noticed that rhetoric from young men or boys engaged in online spaces has become:

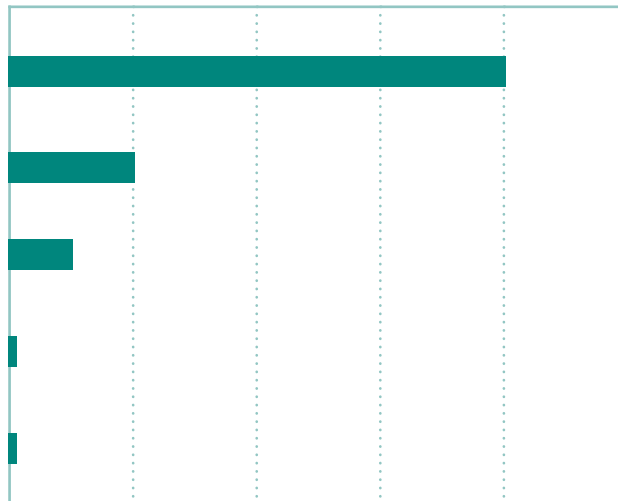
MORE VIOLENT AND/OR AGGRESSIVE

NOT APPLICABLE

NO OPINION

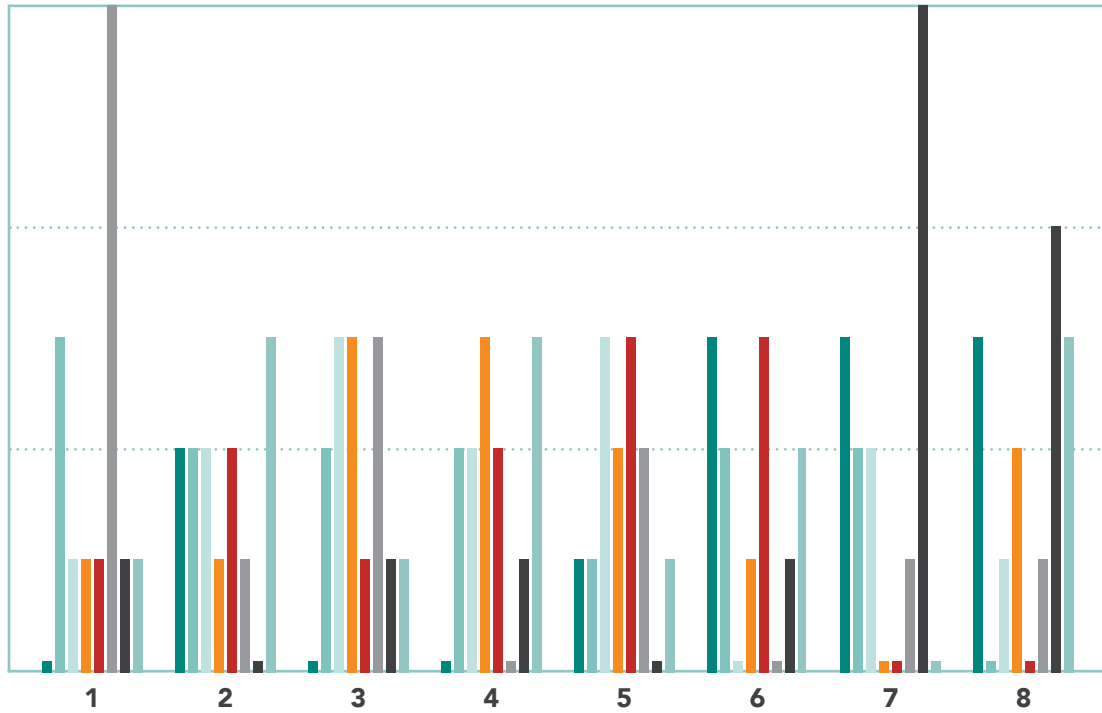
LESS VIOLENT AND/OR AGGRESSIVE

NO CHANGES NOTICED



The next question asked respondents to dive deeper into the types of online violence they were witnessing and rank them in order of prevalence.

2. If you have witnessed or encountered violence or threatening behaviour online, please rank the type of violence from most prevalent to least prevalent:



- Animal harms or threats** (including sexual abuse and sharing related videos)
- Sexual violence**
- Physical violence**
- Direct observations of violent conduct** (saw an example of an individual coercing...)
- Depictions of third party sexual or physical violence** (e.g. gore videos)
- Hate-motivated violence** (racial slurs and derogatory terms)
- Encouraging or coercing others to engage in self-harm or suicide**
- Doxxing** (posting personal information online as harassment)



Animal harms ranked sixth behind hate-motivated violence, sexual violence, doxxing (posting personal information online as harassment), and physical violence. One finding of interest that emerged was the higher ranking of direct observations of violent conduct where the respondent has seen an individual coercing a victim in a violent manner, and depictions of third party sexual or physical violence, such as gore or hurtcore¹ videos.

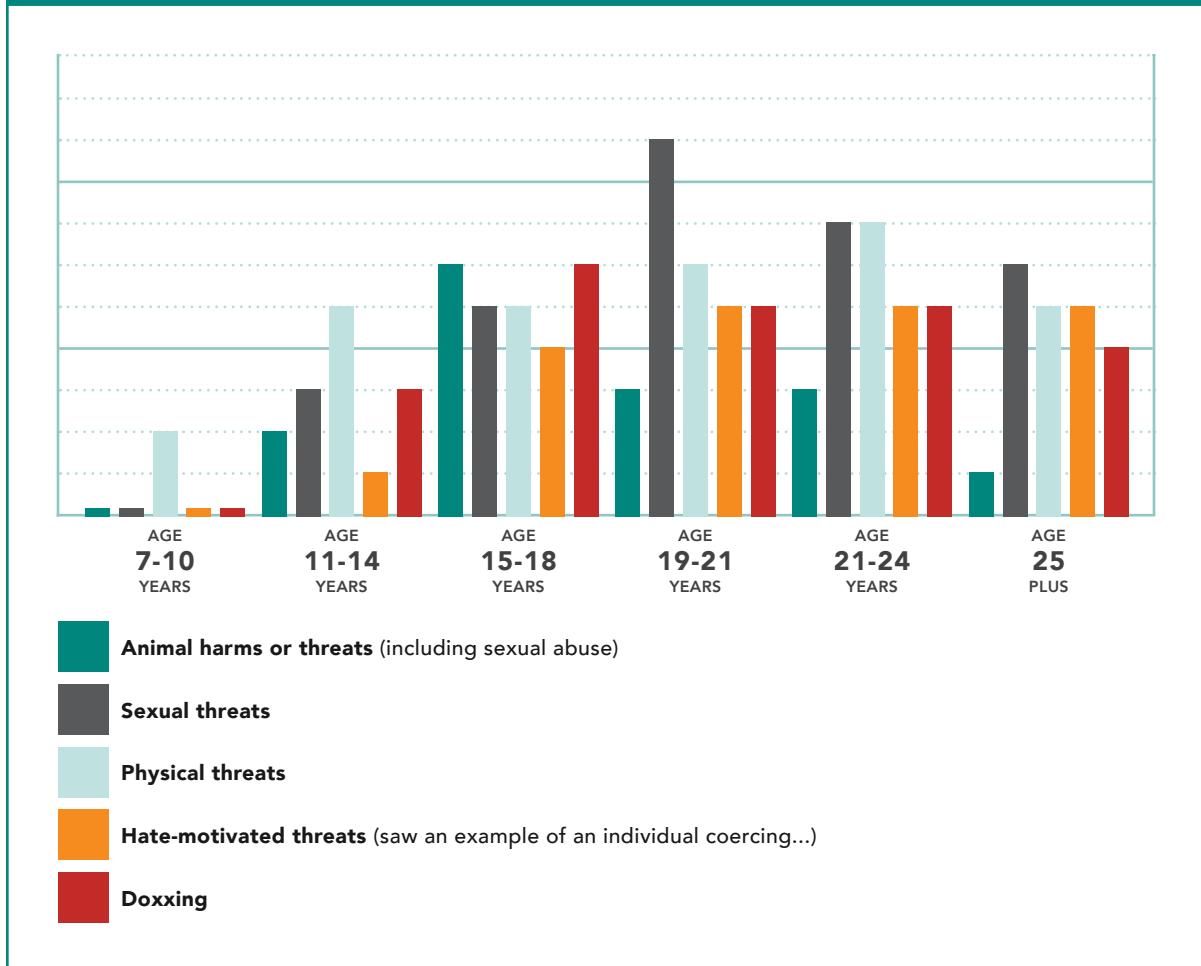
1 "Hurtcore" is a term used for extreme child sexual abuse material that involves depictions of degrading violence and bodily harm beyond BDSM depictions: [Inside the Repulsive World of 'Hurtcore', the Worst Crimes Imaginable](#)



Delving further into the types of online violence seen or experienced by respondents, the survey then asked if certain age groups were more or less likely to engage in specific forms of violence.



3. Have you noticed whether some types of violence are more common with certain age groups than with others?



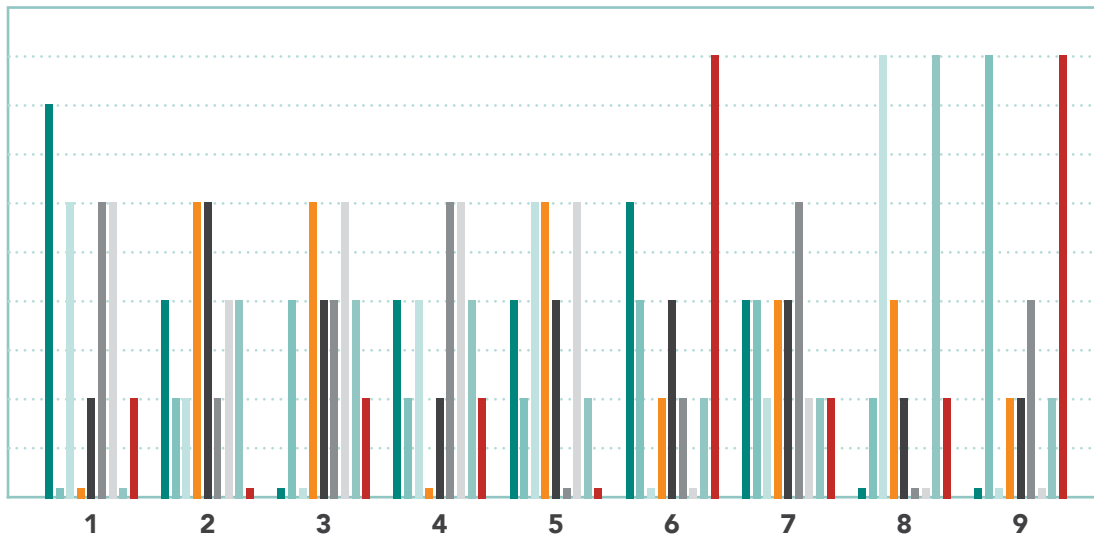
These results indicate that the risk of animal harms or threats begin to rise between ages 11 to 14, then peaks from ages 15 to 18 where it ranks the highest alongside doxxing, before dropping slightly and plateauing from ages 19 through 24. Sexual and physical violence also rank highest among all forms of violence, particularly from age 15 onward.

One qualitative response to this question offered additional insight into violence among different age groups, indicating that some of this behaviour is mimicking adults with hate-motivated threats and physical threats from ages seven to 10 while ages 15-18 engage in violence as a means to show off in addition to copying others.



The survey then switched from types of violence seen online to what respondents feel may be contributing factors driving young men and boys to engage in violent behaviour and possible radicalization, ranked from one being highest likely to nine being lowest.

4. If you have witnessed or encountered violence or threatening behaviour online, please rank the type of violence from most prevalent to least prevalent:

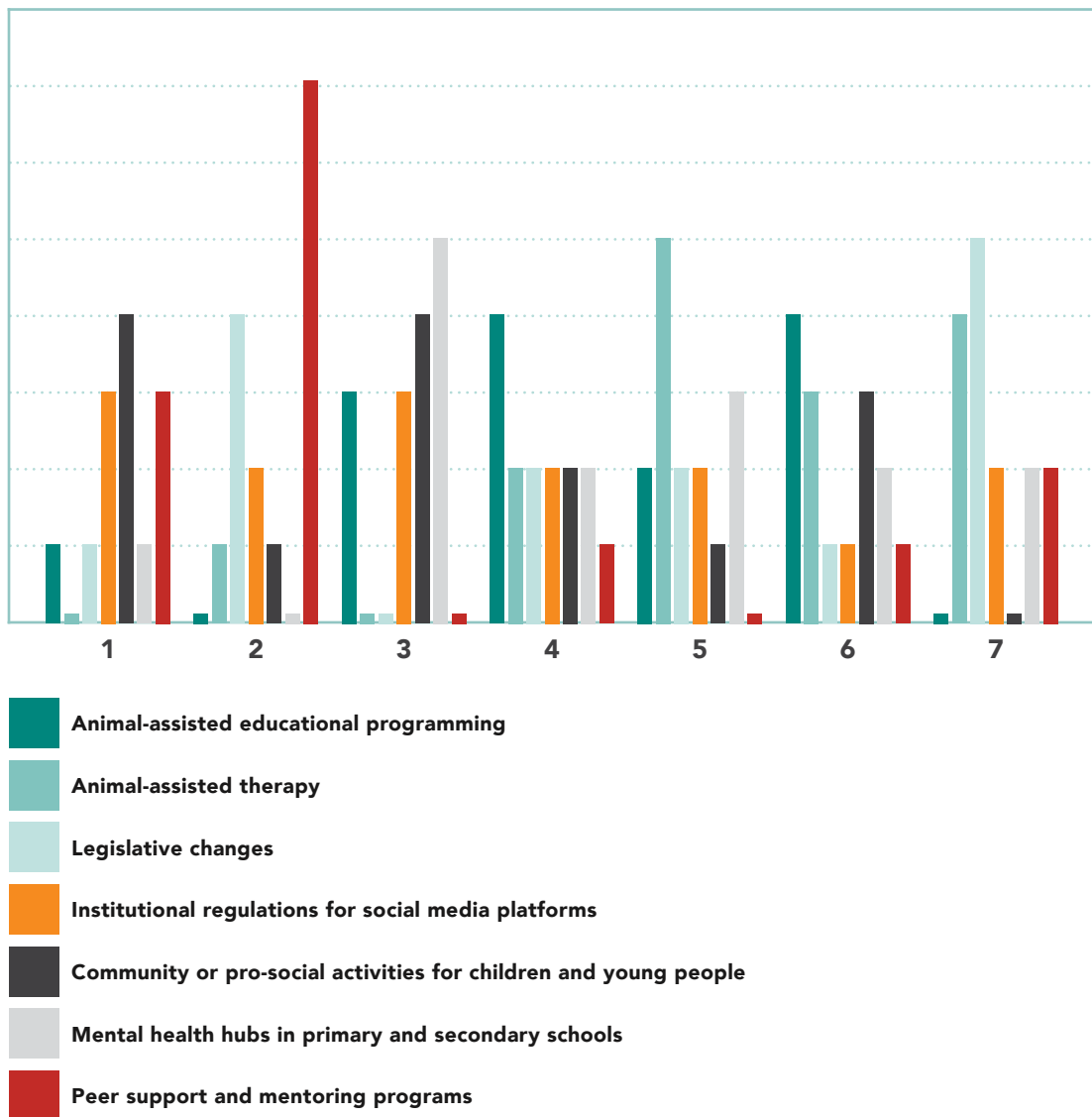


- Social isolation
- Increase in violent programming in media
- Normalization of violence in media
- Exposure to and consumption of violent material online (gore videos, animal torture, etc.)
- Misogyny and sexism in media
- Mental health issues (depression, personality disorders, etc.)
- Social media influence ("manosphere" or mens rights groups, incel groups, other)
- Pressure from peers to engage in extreme behaviours
- Suspected abuse happening in the home (emotional, physical or sexual)



Social isolation ranked consistently high in the top five, as did normalization of violence in media, mental health issues, social media influence, and exposure to violent material online. Suspected abuse in the home ranked surprisingly low, peaking at six and then nine out of nine possible responses.

5. Please rank the strategies you believe would be useful in addressing and counteracting violent radicalization, ranging from most effective to least effective:



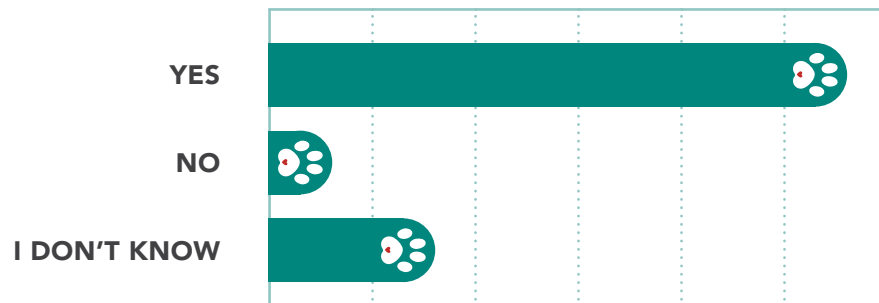
Animal-assisted educational programming starting in primary school to foster empathy through contact with animals and more formal animal-assisted therapy which involves direct, supervised contact with a trained therapy animal also ranked quite high.



Legislative changes with strict enforcement and stronger penalties ranked lower than anticipated, and one reason for that could be found in the qualitative responses received. When the survey asked for more information if a respondent had chosen Other or None as a higher-ranking response, one individual stated that *“Legal strategies can only go so far and in a time of political pushback, I do not believe that would be the most effective course of action.”*



6. Although online radicalization towards violence is often considered from a gendered phenomenon as focusing on boys and young men, have you witnessed girls or young women exhibiting similar violent behaviours as listed above?



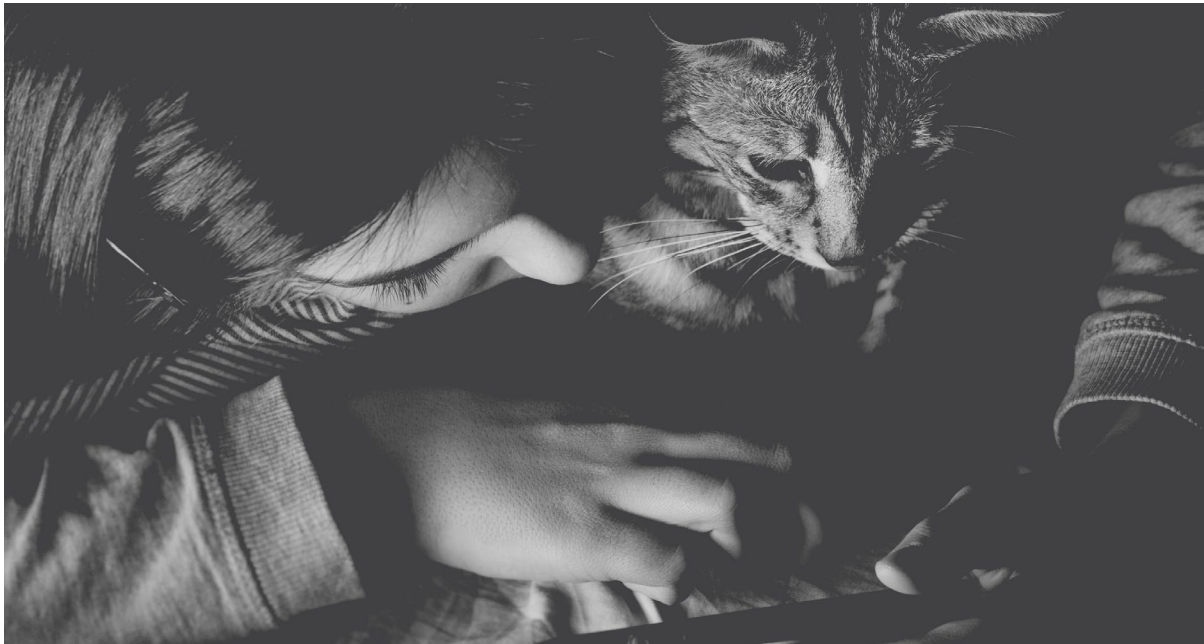
An unexpected finding in response to whether girls or young women were exhibiting violent behaviours online was how many respondents said yes, at 73%.



When asked to expand on those experiences, some of the comments were that girls are engaging in physical violence almost just as often and *“it is starting to become more normalized”* or that respondents have seen examples online of how people of all genders are upholding these behaviours, that *“certain things have become almost normal and have created a system of violence”*.



Other comments indicate that “girls are recruiting other girls in these spaces, physically threatening and actually attacking others”, that they “view aggressive content online and repeat it in real life”, that “these girls are threatened to act violently by COM networks” or that “ideologically motivated extremism tends to attract boys moreso than girls, but there are a lot of girls who are becoming attracted to or engaged in nihilistic subcultures of violence like the True Crime Community and the 764 network”.



One particular response was chilling in its detail:

In my work, I have seen multiple examples of girls sharing violent content (e.g. gore, animal torture videos, self-harm content, etc.), and examples of girls extorting or manipulating others to commit acts of self-harm or luring others into spaces in which they will be victimized. I have also seen girls glorifying and fixating on school shooters and serial killers to the point of making threats against classmates, schools, etc. I have also seen girls recording themselves harming and torturing animals, including pets.



The final question offered survey respondents the opportunity to provide any additional thoughts on how to better address the violence and radicalization online that is targeting boys and young men – as well as girls and young women.

7. Please provide any additional thoughts on how the radicalization of young men and boys (or girls or young women) toward violent behaviours could be addressed.

One suggestion was that there be *“mandatory participation in social activities - whether sports, interest-based programming (art, martial arts, writing, reading, computer skills), or even military or public service. Anything that gets young children away from screens and into social settings that create positive dynamics (teamwork, positive feedback from skills, etc.)”*.



Other thoughts focused on building empathy and a sense of connection for others, as in *“there needs to be some way to practice and strengthen empathy and caring for other beings other than oneself. So working with animals or community groups may provide [it] being more impactful”* and suggests these issues could be addressed organically *“primarily through social connection, positive spaces for young boys and girls and mentorship”*.



One response emphasized the need to acknowledge the issue and the lure it might have, and advocates a professional intervention approach and a counternarrative in the media:

“Interest in extreme content or potential extreme violence needs to be addressed at the school level. Trained professionals need to intervene in schools in part to normalize these interests that more and more young people seem to be having, while still addressing the potential gravity of the situations they might get themselves in.

Also, this new growing phenomenon of nihilist violent extremism often makes actors in the space and victims (two status that often overlap in these communities) feel like they don’t have a way out and that they are especially twisted and messed up, media amplifies that narrative. To intervene adequately that narrative needs to be countered.”

Another response favoured providing safe spaces for kids to open up about things they encounter online: *“I think it is important to give youth a space where they can talk about these things. They see so many harmful things so easily through media but are not given spaces to process what they are seeing. By giving them these spaces and providing them tools on how to address not only what they see, but also the effect it is having on them (emotionally/mentally) we can start to address these violent behaviours”.*

Additional responses support *“a public health approach to prevention which starts well upstream of law enforcement intervention”* but note that *“all of the strategies you listed above for countering radicalization would be a step forward”.*

Many of the qualitative responses collected in the survey corresponded to data revealed during the interview process.



INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

Interviews were held with six individuals from the five survey distribution partner organizations. These interviews were intended to offer participants the opportunity to further discuss the issue of online violence and radicalization as they are encountering it in their work, and review which strategies may have more benefit than others.

Despite the diversity of experiences with online spaces – from a law enforcement perspective to those whose work supports justice-involved male youth – several common elements emerged from these discussions.



ADOLESCENT BOYS ARE AT RISK

In an increasingly disconnected world, more children and young people are growing up with devices and internet access in their hands. In addition to sexual predators, exposure to online violence and radical ideologies has become a growing concern because it can lead to children mirroring the behaviours and embracing those belief systems.



Survey data indicated that youth exhibiting violent behaviours online started at age 11 and increased with age until the late teens and early twenties before declining. This was corroborated by interview data, where participants indicated that the age group where they encountered most of these behaviours was in boys between the ages of 13 and 18.

Recent research from White Ribbon, a nonprofit that promotes healthy masculinities, advances gender equity and builds allyship in men and boys, appears to affirm these findings. As part of a series of Angus Reid surveys conducted in 2024-2025 among professionals that work in education, mental health, child and youth care and related sectors, 84% have encountered individuals with radicalized ideologies.¹⁶



An interviewee from a national non-profit leader in promoting healthy masculinities online to male youth put the vulnerability of this age group into stark context:

"I know of youth who I would say at age around age 13 to 16 face vulnerability with online grooming and sextortion. And what I've seen, for example, is a 14-year-old logged into Roblox and it was less than 5 minutes in a particular lobby on a particular game before a [sup]posed girl gave him again in quotations, her Snapchat. Maybe it was a girl his age, maybe it wasn't right. But it was less than 5 minutes."



They went on to highlight that this cross-platform luring was also common, *"like I'm meeting you here and I'm gonna draw you there and we're gonna talk about this and then we're gonna talk about..."*, which then leads to coercion into violent or sexual acts or to self-harm.



WHERE ONLINE VIOLENCE IS WIDESPREAD, ANIMAL HARMS WOULD BE A RED FLAG

In the survey data, the most prominent forms of violence seen were physical, sexual and hate-motivated threats most commonly, with animal harms ranked further down. This does not mean it's not present, but that it might be overlooked in relation to threats or violence against humans. This is something Humane Canada has witnessed all too often in criminal investigations and law: Unless animals are specifically referenced, they will be ignored.



In the interviews when specifically asked about animal harms, each respondent had a story, which is in line with our experiences speaking to various groups about animal abuse. One interviewee shared their personal experiences with encountering animal abuse online:

“Sometimes I’ll be scrolling through Facebook myself and the amount of videos that I have seen that are just grotesque against animals just and I constantly report it. But you know, there’s been time—and I’m like almost 30 and I’ve seen some, I’ve seen some shit—so when I’ve seen videos like that where it literally gets me for the rest of the day, it’s like I can’t even imagine how other, how kids could be seeing this and how not being able to articulate their feelings or be able to speak to anybody about it for fear of being shamed or being in trouble.”



The other animal abuse stories mostly related to previous in-person encounters with youth, but law enforcement interviewees reported their experiences with online animal harm content:

“Extorting others to commit acts of self-harm, individuals that were harming and committing acts of torture against animals, individuals posting animal torture content. All of those things are things that we routinely see in some of the spaces that we work on...”

You know, most of them appear [to] generally get into the space when they’re quite young, 13-14ish. They’re getting arrested or identified around the time, you know, they’re 13 to 17ish would be sort of the hotspot I would say.”



Survey responses identified youth aged 15 to 18 as being most responsible for animal threats or harms. The Humane Canada presentation from the RCMP noted that members of these online groups that use animal harm to desensitize and radicalize followers toward violence are often minors and youth who glorify school shooters, serial killers, terrorist attackers, and animal or child sexual predators like former Australian zoologist Adam Britton who sexually abused and tortured dogs for more than a decade, sharing videos of his crimes on Telegram under the name Monster or Cerebus.¹⁷





Other stories of animal harm support prevailing theories that children who engage in animal abuse are doing so because of a lack of control of or emptiness in their own lives.¹⁸ One youth criminal justice support worker who had worked at an in-person program for youth shared their thoughts on hearing about animal abuse from their clients:

“And the one thing I always gathered from that when it was happening was just the control aspect, of trying to gain or wanting that feeling of control over something or control over something innocent and oftentimes due to them not having feel like they had control in their life. So trying to gain that control somewhere else.”

The interviewee from the national nonprofit that promotes healthy masculinities shared their experience:

“It was a kid who in an in-person program mentioned hurting his dog as a way to. It was like a version of self-harm. You know how young people would like self-harm to regulate themselves or to like externalize some of what they’re feeling.”



Other types of online violence discussed in the interviews centered around sexual violence in the form of sharing intimate photos. For the academic interviewee who researches youth online experiences, sexual violence and precociousness in adolescence would be considered a red flag in addition to animal harms at any time. They also noted that *“in terms of dating relationships, like physical violence starts to increase as kids start dating, which can be as young as grade six”*.

Also discussed was the “myth of masculinity”, which a caseworker that works with justice-involved male youth described as:

“Can’t remember what they call it, but it’s basically the man mentality where you have to show power and dominance to anybody at any time. And if you’re caught slipping, then you’re now the one who’s going to be at the bottom of the totem pole. And so you’re building that, as they would call it, aura farming.

Where you’re building up, um, this, whether it be persona or anything of this, I can do this, let’s say kick a dog because like, that’s one funny to like, I don’t care so much. Which means I don’t have these vulnerable emotions that, you know, those kinds of things that really trample it down.”

‘Aura farming’ is the act of doing something to look cool, impressive or stylish.¹⁹ In this context, it would be to prove how ‘tough’ you are by harming or watching an animal being harmed and appearing not to care.

The interviewee from the national nonprofit supporting healthy masculinity went further, describing it as *“the continuation of the sort of myth of masculinity that you can’t back down from a fight. It’s very common that disagreements that are external become quite personal.”* They also indicated that it was not uncommon that issues that had occurred in person would be carried over to the digital space.



Other online content that exists in the periphery of online violent networks as reported by the law enforcement interviewees include child sexual abuse material, which attracts sexual predators to these spaces, and “videos depicting suicide. Self-harm, animal torture, murders... ISIS execution videos. You’ll see a lot of, you know, cartel murders or what are alleged to be cartel murders, industrial accidents, vehicle accidents... dead bodies, medical procedures, basically. Things showing, you know, different kinds of human gore”. The purpose of this content is to desensitize people to violence by “threat actors that are basically calling them soft and using the videos to desensitize them and saying like you need to get over this, you know, get past your moral constraints”.

Finally, there is a commercial element to animal torture networks occurring alongside the violent nihilistic network, which according to law enforcement involve an older demographic.

“I’m talking about most often your crush video networks. They seem to be an older group of individuals than say like the year 14-to-17-year range. Like you have what appear to be adults creating those videos professionally for sale. In a lot of cases, the monkey torture networks, the individuals consuming and paying for the videos and or getting arrests in the States tend to be older.”

However, they noted one important exception:

“I will say though, however, the videographers, that’s what they’re called in like Indonesia and Malaysia. At least one of the famous cases was a minor. And in fact, the fact that he was a minor who is actually getting the monkeys and making the videos, like torturing them himself, the fact that he was a minor ended up adding additional offenses to the individuals who were being arrested in the US because they were making him do certain sexual things and that brought in CSAM [child sexual abuse material] offenses”.





The American arrests law enforcement refers to are related to specific legislation under which charges can be placed for animal torture: the Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture Act, 2019, which makes an offence of conduct in which one or more living non-human mammals, birds, reptiles, or amphibians is purposely crushed, burned, drowned, suffocated, impaled, or otherwise subjected to serious bodily injury, including any depictions of this conduct in videos, photographs or other electronic recording, both within and beyond US borders.²⁰ Currently, there is no such provision in Canada's Criminal Code.

With the scope and range of violent material online that is available to children and young people, it is important to consider the risk factors involved that could make such material appealing to vulnerable youth.





“LACK OF BELONGING, LACK OF HOPE, LACK OF PURPOSE”

In the survey, social isolation, mental health issues, social media influence, normalization of violence in media, and exposure to violent material online were ranked highest as factors that could be driving young men and boys to engage in violent behaviour and possible radicalization. Social media influence and social isolation may seem somewhat incongruous, but when you consider that many people spend their lives online and do not socialize in person as they would have done before the Internet, it begins to make sense. Interviewees suggested that the isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic that closed schools and most in-person programming for everyone, but for *“some of the kids that were increasingly socially isolated during that period has definitely had a detrimental effect and we’re seeing that playing out now with immersion in violence”*.



The caseworker that works with justice-involved male youth took it further, suggesting that society has been unable to recover a sense of community:

“And it’s one of those things where, you know, we ended up as, you know, as a society, we started like losing this idea of community and everything. And it was a very like. Every man to like every man for themselves kind of situation. And then, you know, I think, yeah, COVID definitely made it harder because it forced that disconnection. It forced that isolation. And then I think like as a society, we’ve had a really hard time kind of recovering from that.”



All of the interviewees highlighted that children and young people who would be drawn to online networks are looking for community. Interviewees from very different sectors made similar comments about isolation and looking for connection or meaning:

“They’re saying how they kind of, that isolation, saying that they’re, you know, find it hard to find people to trust, find it hard to find people to talk to, find it hard to find people that get them or understand them. So really they don’t say they’re seeking community, but of course that’s what it is. They’re seeking some sort of community to belong to.”





The interviewee from the national nonprofit pointed to research their organization had done in this area that spells out this issue clearly:

“This is like the drum that I’m always beating but that like that like boys are looking for a connection in a lot of ways. We’ve done some research with young teenage boys and identified and again this you can see this other research sites as well that like a lot of what boys are doing online revolves around social connection. It’s a very social space. Video games, for example, are highly social. It’s more than 90% of boys are playing video games with a friend, like 90% of the time. And so they’re looking for spaces of belonging.

...I think if boys aren’t getting a feeling of belonging, for example, in their school classroom, if they’re not getting a feeling of independence or autonomy within their family, like if they’re not getting those needs met, they’re going to go looking for them.”





They also reflected on the differences between traditional social media and other social online spaces, like gaming chats and other online forums where people gather:

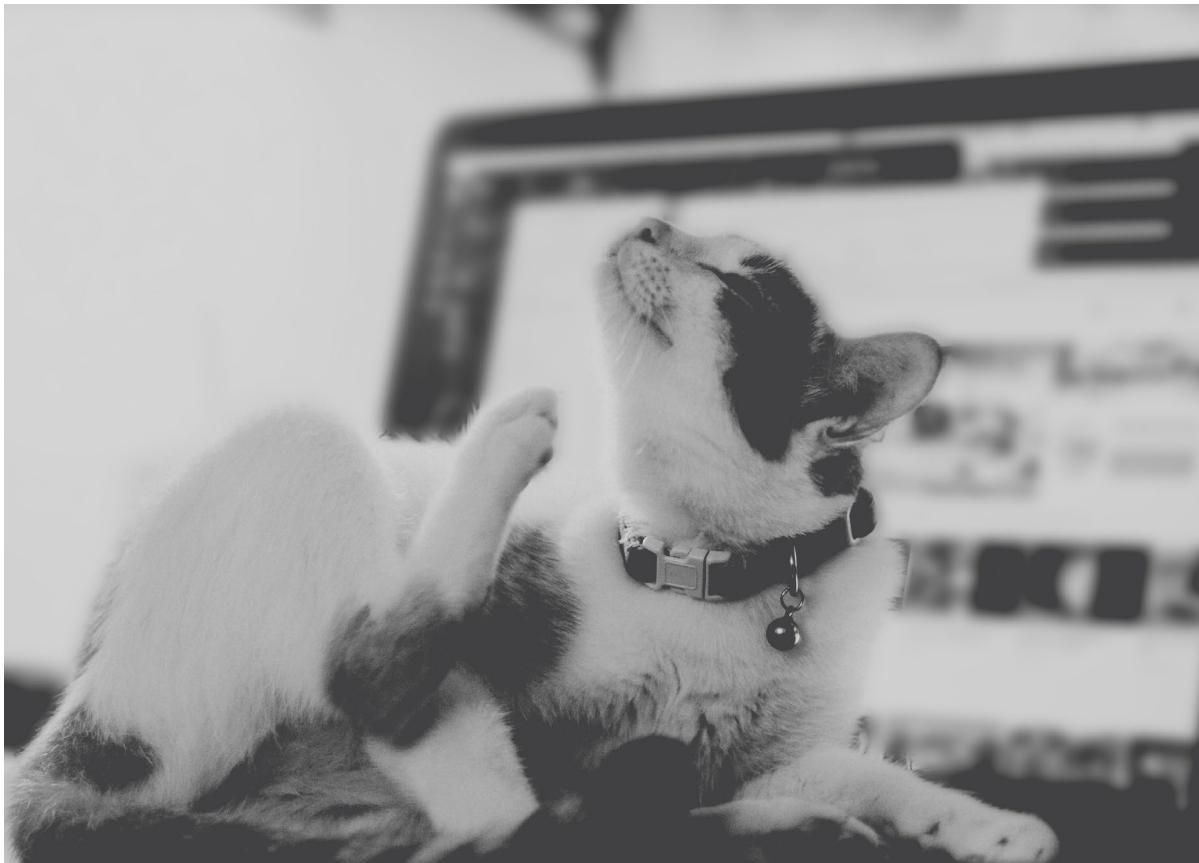
“The interesting thing is that we as adults don’t always like look at social media with the same level of nuance as young people that, like TikTok versus Discord versus Reddit versus X like versus Twitch, like they’re almost unrecognizable. It’s like we call them all social media, but it’s almost like the umbrella term of like retail outlet. Like you could be talking about a grocery store or a beauty salon. Like they’re very, very different.”



Interviewees also discussed algorithms and content being put out by these groups. The youth criminal justice support worker stated that they had first started hearing about problematic online networks like the 'manosphere' and nihilistic violent groups through those youth:

"So the things that they're seeing online, the community that they're interacting with social media influence that really they kind of go hand in hand [with seeking community where they belong online], but kind of more so the social media influence through the manosphere and extremist groups if the young boys are feeling isolated and seeking a community.

Those extremist groups really target young men and feed into that idea of building a community. They know that that's what they're searching for and will pump out content directly to that."





They go on to mention the role that algorithms play:

“Once they start to, of course, looking into more of that content, then their algorithm picks it up. And then once their algorithm picks it up, that’s all they’re seeing. And then once those youth, once that’s all they’re seeing, then they start believing like, oh, everyone’s thinking this way, ‘cause it’s all over my social media. So I feel like that’s the trajectory of how I’ve seen it.”

The academic interviewee concurs, lamenting that *“the algorithm is so powerful and like, we don’t know what it is. Like I can’t even counter program to it because we don’t know what it is. It’s designed to make a lot of money.”*



Immersion or exposure to violent content online, which can occur once it becomes part of the algorithm, ranked highly in the survey responses. Repeated exposure to violent content is how it becomes normalized. As the law enforcement interviewees point out, *“human violence is depicted quite frequently in media and elsewhere, and it’s much more sort of normalized.”* They explain their theory as to why animal torture content is used as a desensitization tool.

“Hurtcore, CSAM [child sexual abuse material] and animal torture content beyond sort of your human gore content, seems to have much more shock value, more radicalizing effect. I think it has a larger desensitization effect because of the level of sadism and in the taboos that are depicted in those, you know, animal torture, CSAM, hurtcore videos. I think if you show 10 people, you know, 10 random people, different kinds of videos, it’s going to be the animal torture ones that are going to upset them the most and be sort of the most sadistic and depraved.”

They conclude by recalling when they have worked with integrated child exploitation units around the country who have worked with child sexual exploitation material for years, but *“we send them some animal stuff and they say it’s some of the worst stuff they’ve ever seen”*.





A lack of empathy as a contributing factor was also discussed during the interviews, where the academic interviewee brought up the concept of “gendered socialization of empathy”:

“We know we don’t socialize boys to be highly empathetic. Starting in like mid-childhood, you start to see this gender and it is a gender divergence, not a sex divergence in how we socialize empathy. And so, yeah, I think that’s critical because a lot of this comes back to that.”

As the interview turned to possible intervention strategies to encourage empathy, the academic confessed that *“I’d never thought about animal assisted therapy, you know, to kind of build that. But I think that’s really interesting. It’s a really cool idea.”*



INTERVENTIONS THAT INCLUDE POSITIVE PROGRAMMING

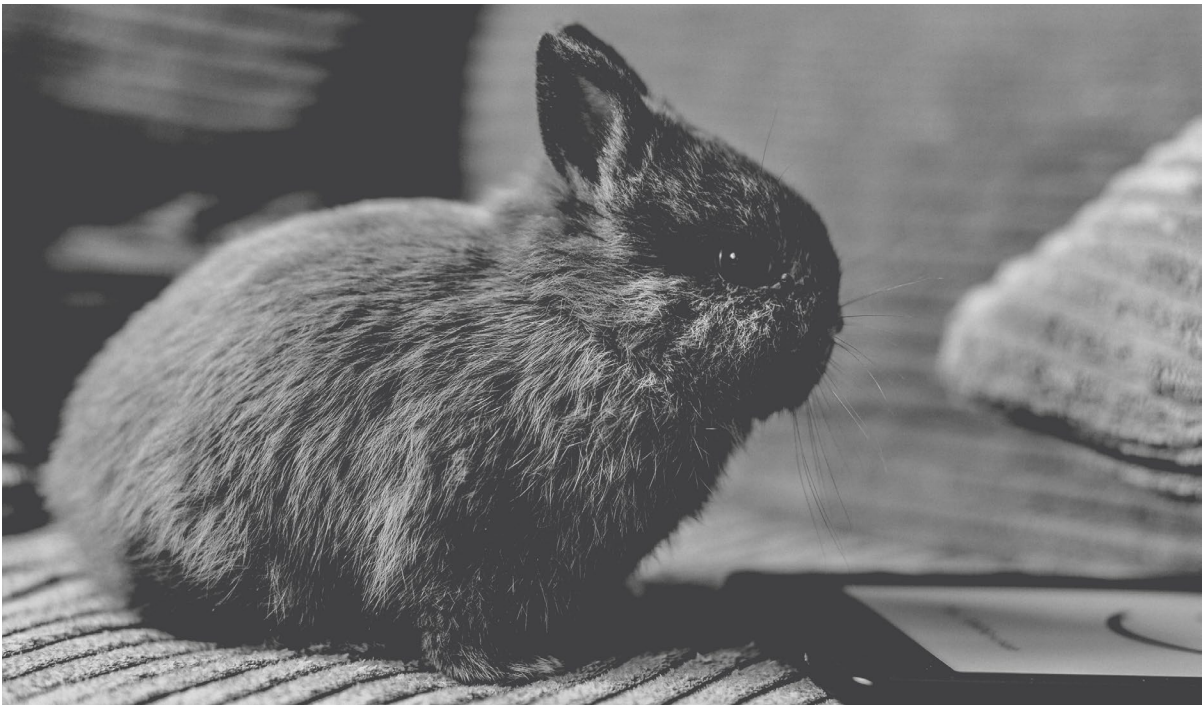
The survey respondents highly ranked community and prosocial activities for children and young people and peer-support or mentoring programs that model healthy masculinities as strategies that could be most useful in addressing the issues that are contributing to online violence. These were mirrored in the interview discussions.



All interviewees were particularly responsive to the idea of fostering empathy through animal-assisted educational programming starting in primary schools, including law enforcement:

“Early education, empathy-based classes involving animals would be super important. I think that’s a great idea for an early empathy training... Having them understand like entities or beings other than themselves are sentient and have lives, I think could go a long way, especially when it’s done at an early age.”





Others discussed a holistic approach with positive spaces that help build personal connections to mitigate feelings of isolation and create that sense of community that is missing.

"I think it needs to be, you know, a bit more of a wrap around approach, a more holistic approach to those young people's well-being..."

Referring specifically to programs that educate about online harms and build empathy for animals, the caseworker who works with male youth shared:

"I definitely think attacking the online space of just in general for everybody in terms of just even within Canada, what can be seen in terms of videos, images like that and then if we if there were like more community education programs or like when you're going into kindergarten and it's this is a mandatory thing... I know that they try to teach it in kindergarten, like 'sharing is caring' these kinds of things."

However, they also raised the issue of different cultures may have different viewpoints, and when classrooms are crowded it would be difficult.





With respect to changes in legislation or regulations, the interviewees leaned more towards enforced regulations and accountability for technology companies that create the platforms these groups use to distribute content and ensnare targeted youth. While the interviewee from the national nonprofit acknowledged that they knew *“tech platforms well enough to know that they do have really committed, talented and well-equipped staff that are working on trust and safety issues, but those departments and those teams don’t always get the funding that product innovation does necessarily”*.





Conversely, the academic interviewee compared the situation and companies that create these platforms to a biblical Goliath “asking parents and kids in schools to tackle it”, and as a public health hazard that should be restricted like other products:

“Tech companies, they have, they could tell us everything about every, every entry point, everything they clicked like, but they don’t have to. There’s no, there’s no regulation. And yet they’re like tobacco, they’re a health harming product. So I think like that to me has to be, yes, individual skills capacities, yes, neighbourhoods, yes, out of school time activities. But like you have this health harming companies like running amok.

And so I think like the regulation piece must be there because it’s not much like with like smoking, like it’s not just an individual health issue. Like it’s these companies, the mass amount of money, online gambling, like all of it and starting to embed that in some youth education, like these people are just making money off of you. That was effective in anti-smoking.

So I think we could do maybe some of that and really getting youth to recognize like how they’re being used to someone else’s gain.”





They are also in support of community-building programs led by well-trained facilitators *“who know how to work with boys in those spaces because it is a unique kind of facilitation”* to avoid backlash and resistance, with which other interviewees concurred.

Media literacy that increases awareness of online harms came up with most interviewees. The national nonprofit interviewee also brought up ‘cross-platform signal sharing’ and transferring that concept beyond the tech sector:

“In the tech field, they have for years now been innovating and developing what they call a cross-platform signal sharing. Essentially that because of the recognition that perpetrators are dancing from one platform to the next, often with multiple accounts.

They need really effective ways to signal from meta to Discord for example, or for Discord to Snap that like this is an account that we flagged and what we want you to be aware of. So that signal sharing is I think a model that can be brought into other contexts because of the multifaceted nature of of this particular form of violence.”





They also mentioned how working groups looking at online groups like 764 are looking at education and awareness to raise red flags among parents, educators and veterinarians, which they found interesting:

“Veterinarians was a really interesting one that if veterinarians can recognize what inflicted harm might look like and then raise that the kind of the question. I think right now is who do they raise that to? Like is it the police? Is it a clinician? Like is it a hospital like that? I think that’s kind of a little unclear.”

They went on to highlight the need for solutions that meet young people where they’re at, otherwise there is no moving forward:

***“If the problems are with boys online, the solutions should be with boys online.** And part of the reason that I think that is because. Like for example if you have a street involved youth who is working, who’s engaged in gun violence for example, like a digital virtual online supportive peer community, it’s kind of irrelevant to him like he’s really focused on his in-person neighbourhood and context. And then similarly if you have a kid who is engaging in radicalized or extreme content online and you offer him an in-person classroom-based or let’s say a basketball program for example. Again, it’s kind of irrelevant because that’s not where his attention and focus and **that’s not where the problem is.**”*





GIRLS ARE BEING RADICALIZED TOWARD VIOLENCE AS WELL AS TARGETED FOR VICTIMIZATION

While the media portrays perpetrators in violent online networks as predominantly male, this study revealed that is not completely accurate. There are also girls who become involved in these spaces.

“There are other individuals who are actually in those spaces of like 764 and like those kinds of things where they as obviously it starts with something very small and then it’s just balloons really quickly. So the small thing could be just recognizing these feelings and like pushing moments of violence or hatred and that it’s OK and that it’s normalized or to be celebrated and then that and I typically hear it does start with animals.”



There's another a female youth. So we have our male youth building, we have a female youth building as well. And so she specifically, I don't know a lot about her, but she herself has a very specific tendency to harm birds specifically, like birds. She'll just grab from outside, kill them, and then she'll put them in her freezer. And then the freezer's just filled with all of these, unfortunately, passed on birds that passed away from her hand.

And for her it's that piece of she doesn't have any sense of belonging for her. She has no idea who she is. She's going through different changes... And self harms herself. And then when she feels like it's not doing good enough for her to self harm, then that comes to the emotional release on to another subject, again being an animal, right?

So it's definitely we've been seeing it more so on like those individuals who either have no sense of place or just have deeply seated trauma associated that just leads to intense emotional dysregulation."



This recollection came from the caseworker who mostly works with male, justice-involved youth, who remembered this story when asked if they had heard of girls or young women being radicalized toward violence online. Although this memory involved an incident occurring in real life, 73% of survey respondents indicated that they had witnessed girls or young women exhibiting similar violent behaviours.





From the 26-year-old serial cat killer in Calgary²¹ to the recent Winnipeg case where a woman received a 12-year prison sentence for her role in crushing animals with her bare feet for video content hosted on the dark web that was advertised and sold through a Telegram chat,²² incidents involving female animal abuse offenders have been on the rise. The interviewee from the national nonprofit supporting male youth has a plausible theory for female perpetrators of violence in the nihilistic network space.

“The first thing that came to mind for me is what Mark Andre Argentino describes as the victim to perpetrator pipeline that a lot of the and I know you didn’t ask specifically about those who are perpetrating nihilistic violent extremism, but that that I think that’s just really important that we remember a lot of those who are like coercing others or perpetrating that kind of violence have likely experienced violence themselves, whether that’s within 764 or a similar network or maybe just within their like interpersonal, you know, for example, within their family and that kind of thing.

I remember this is likely to translate the exposure of violence into the perpetration of violence. So there’s both an increased risk of experiencing that and also an increased likelihood that that experience of victimization would translate into perpetration. And so I think that’s part of it.”





Marc Andre Argentino is a senior researcher at Public Safety Canada who has spent the last several years researching the Com network and has a decade of experience researching and working in countering and mitigating threats to national security.²³ He has described how 764, a group within the Com network, focuses on recruiting its potential members and victims in online communities that feature gore or celebrate mass shooters, terrorism and violent extremism, as well as gaming spaces and platforms.²⁴

The victim to perpetrator pipeline refers to the cycle of violence involved where those initially victimized by these networks can sometimes become perpetrators.²⁵ This trajectory follows a similar pattern to family violence cycles, where children who were abused or watched a parent being abused growing up are more likely to become an abuser or be abused themselves later in life.²⁶ It creates a type of double victimization for these targets, many of whom are female-identifying and may be part of vulnerable groups as in living with disordered eating or tendencies toward self-harm or suicidal ideation. When caught up with these predatory groups, they first become victims as targeted but through further grooming and desensitization, they can become a predator themselves by the lure of false power as a trauma response. According to Argentino, “trauma is essential to the preservation and growth of the community; trauma preserves members who are either scared of losing social bonds or accepting what they have done”, which makes the idea of escape seem impossible.²⁷ While double victimization typically refers to the treatment victims of abuse receive through the criminal justice system, in this case it is continual victimization that creates a violence cycle that is difficult to leave.





Normalization of violence was a major theme that emerged in the survey responses to the question about girls/women performing nihilistic violence, which suggests that it is not limited to displays of extreme masculinity. The caseworker that works with justice-involved youth offered some insight into possible factors for this behaviour:

“So at least from the male perspective, it’s really that huge part of just maintaining this figure of being a man. Very toxic masculinity. And then when I look at the kind of female perspective, I would say it’s more in the sense of this absolute loss of strong convictions, morals, sense of self confidence.

Like the difference between working with male youth and female youth is that with males they need to, they need to be, they need to be shown love and taught love, whereas the females need to learn how to love themselves and be taught self-love. And so that always ends up coming out in OK, well, from the guy’s perspective, the guys will accept me and think I’m cool if I do this, whereas the females are like, I don’t love myself. I’m this terrible person. And this, this is how I’m going to take it out because it’s not going to work for myself.



And that's typically how I would see it in the contributing factors, especially again when they come from such an institutionalized, whether it's group homes or anything like that. It's like, they're already kind of taught at such a young age that they're just a piece of a puzzle. They're not actually a person. And so when you grow up with that complete sense of depersonalization, you're not even going to be able... You can't even place it on yourself, let alone other people or animals."



Depersonalization and emotional dysregulation that is deeply rooted in trauma were recurrent themes in interviews with those who worked with and supported justice-involved youth. It would be interesting to delve into the differences in motivational factors, as well as gender-centric interventions that support all victims of this form of violence.





CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to gather data from Canadian organizations that support or study boys and young men in online spaces through survey and interviews with select candidates to determine if they are encountering increasing violent radicalization in their work and what they feel are factors that are driving young people to turn to online ideologies that are increasingly anti-feminist, misogynistic and extremist in their views. What we learned runs deeper than that, rooted in a toxic online culture in the making over the past several years.



DOUBLE VICTIMIZATION CREATES CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, PUTTING GIRLS AT RISK

This is an emerging form of technologically facilitated violence that crosses gender lines, but in many cases targets vulnerable girls and young women. One of our most significant findings was that girls or young women are also involved in this space in high numbers, often initially as victims and then as perpetrators of threats and violence that target new victims.



This research indicates that some girls are being pulled into harmful online spaces where they recruit or threaten others, mimic the violent content they see online, and are pressured through grooming and desensitization by these nihilistic networks to act more violently. While extremist ideologies often target boys, many girls are increasingly drawn into violence-focused subcultures online such as True Crime communities and the 764 network.

A major theme was the normalization of violence, alongside trauma-related factors like depersonalization and emotional dysregulation. Trauma keeps them tied to these groups, creating a continuous cycle of violence that feels nearly impossible to escape.



ADOLESCENT BOYS AND YOUNG MEN ALSO AT RISK

Survey and interview data indicate that violent behaviours seen online in boys and young men can begin at age 11 and increase with age until the late teens and early twenties before declining. This was corroborated by interview data, where participants indicated that the age group where they encountered most of these behaviours was in boys between the ages of 13 and 18.



In addition to the risks in double victimization for youth who become involved with these networks, four other themes emerged from this study from the survey's qualitative data and then corroborated in the interviews.



YOUNG PEOPLE FEELING “LACK OF BELONGING, LACK OF HOPE, LACK OF PURPOSE” MOST AT RISK



Online, young men and boys, along with girls and young women, are increasingly vulnerable to violent behaviour and radicalization due to a mix of social isolation, mental health challenges, constant exposure to violent content, and the influence of online platforms. Although social isolation and heavy social media use might seem contradictory, interviewees explained that many young people now spend most of their social lives online, reducing real-world connection. COVID-19 is thought to have deepened this isolation, removing in-person supports and leaving some youth more immersed in violent online spaces.

Participants emphasized that many boys online are seeking belonging, connection, and autonomy. Highly social digital spaces, especially in gaming where most boys play with friends, can provide that sense of community. When boys don't feel that they belong at school or at home, they actively look for connection online, making them more susceptible to harmful networks that appear to offer identity and social acceptance.



WHERE ONLINE VIOLENCE IS WIDESPREAD, ANIMAL HARMS WOULD BE A RED FLAG

Eighty percent of survey respondents reported an overall increase in violent or aggressive online behaviour. Within this landscape, animal harms ranked sixth, following hate-motivated violence, sexual violence, doxxing, and physical violence. The incidence of animal-related harms or threats begins to rise between ages 11 and 14, peaks between ages 15 and 18—where it ranks highest alongside doxxing—and then declines slightly, stabilizing from ages 19 to 24. Sexual and physical violence were reported as the most prevalent forms of online violence from ages 15 onward.

Online involvement in violent behaviour evolves with age but across all ages, ***animal harm is a consistent red flag that is often overlooked unless explicitly raised***. Younger children (7–10) tend to mimic violent behaviour they have seen from adults, while youth aged 15 to 18 use violence, including harming animals, to impress or replicate online content.

Law enforcement interviewees emphasized that animal torture videos are uniquely extreme, used for shock value and capable of rapidly desensitizing young people because of their intense sadism and taboo nature. They noted that, among various forms of violent media, animal torture content is typically the most disturbing and depraved.

What is particularly telling is that every interviewee had firsthand examples where they had encountered animal harm in other areas of their work, which only reinforces that unless animal harm is specifically named, it will be unintentionally ignored, especially where other forms of violence are present.



INTERVENTIONS WITH POSITIVE PROGRAMMING, ANIMAL-ASSISTED EDUCATION TO FOSTER EMPATHY



Alongside traditional community-based supports, respondents viewed animal-assisted programming as part of a broader wrap-around, connection-focused prevention approach that counters isolation and helps youth develop healthier social and emotional tools.

Animal-assisted education emerged as one of the highest-ranked and most strongly supported interventions. Interviewees emphasized that introducing animal-focused empathy programming in primary school, either through regular contact with animals or more structured animal-assisted therapy, can build early prosocial behaviours, foster empathy and help children understand that animals are sentient beings. They noted that early empathy-based learning involving animals is especially powerful, because it teaches children to recognize the feelings and lives of others, which can reduce violence and prevent desensitization.

However, as one interviewee put it so succinctly: ***“If the problems are with boys online, the solutions should be with boys online”***. Building positive online spaces that could include animal-assisted education to encourage empathy and mitigate feelings of isolation.



ALGORITHMS CREATE INFORMATION BUBBLES AND ECHO CHAMBERS, CALLING FOR REGULATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY FROM TECH COMPANIES WHO CREATE THESE PLATFORMS

Young people navigate a wide range of online spaces that function very differently from one another, with platforms like TikTok, Discord, Reddit, X, and Twitch that are “almost unrecognizable” if compared to each other. Extremist groups exploit these environments by targeting youth seeking community, feeding them tailored content that algorithms quickly pick up and amplify. With more frequent engagement, young people’s feeds become saturated with the same narratives, creating an echo chamber that makes harmful content appear normalized.

One interviewee described tech companies as a “Goliath” with vast data and no substantial regulatory obligations, comparing their platforms to previously unregulated health-harming products like tobacco.

Media literacy emerged as a key priority across interviews, and stressed the need to better equip parents, educators, and veterinarians to recognize online harms. One interviewee highlighted “cross-platform signal sharing,” a system already used in the tech sector to flag abusive or dangerous accounts as they move between platforms like Meta, Discord, and Snapchat. Because perpetrators often operate across multiple accounts and platforms, interviewees suggested that this type of coordinated flagging model could be adapted beyond tech to strengthen early detection and intervention across sectors.



RECOMMENDATIONS



When asked for final thoughts, interviewees and survey respondents re-emphasized points that inform recommendations on how the emerging threat of animal abuse and online violent networks could be addressed.





RECOMMENDATION 1: CREATE COMMUNITIES THAT CHILDREN ARE MISSING, BOTH ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Building empathy and genuine social connection are essential to prevention. Study participants noted that giving young people opportunities to care for others, including through working with animals or community groups, can meaningfully strengthen empathy and promote healthier development.

Because this threat has originated online, the immediate priority should be creating safe online spaces for community, but for those who may wish to extend beyond that, in person experiences could also be explored. Some Humane Canada Members offer humane education programming, which can feature compassionate pet care and the welfare of companion, farmed and wild animals that is tailored to specific age groups. Online, research participants Next Gen Men offer a safe, online Discord community for male-identifying youth at [NGM Alliance — Next Gen Men](#).





RECOMMENDATION 2: COUNTER THE NARRATIVE

Participants also highlighted that nihilist violent extremism purposely creates a sense of hopelessness among both perpetrators and victims, reinforcing the belief that they are beyond help and keeping them captive in a cycle of violence. Recognizing and countering this narrative is critical. Resources from MediaSmarts, a Canadian nonprofit dedicated to digital media literacy professionals, offers [Educational Games](#) for all age groups to improve media literacy, while like international organization Institute for Strategic Dialogue who have recently published [Spotting the Signs: Recognizing and Responding to Subcultures of Nihilistic Violence](#) are a good option for parents and educators looking to spot warning signs in their children.





RECOMMENDATION 3: A ONE HEALTH APPROACH TO PREVENTION

Violence of any kind does not exist in a vacuum, therefore intervention strategies cannot exist there either. Early, upstream supports that focus on identification and cross-collaboration between institutions should be introduced, rather than relying on law enforcement intervention alone.



RECOMMENDATION 4: STRICTER REGULATORY ENFORCEMENT

Tech companies who are creating platforms that violent extremist groups use to target potential victims and recruit new members owe a duty of care to the public they serve, and as such should increase reporting mechanisms and removal of content that is flagged as harmful by its users.





This study underscores the urgent need for coordinated, upstream interventions that address the growing normalization of violence and the complex online ecosystems that are influencing Canadian young people. The findings highlight that both boys and girls are vulnerable to violent online networks that exploit isolation, trauma, and a search for belonging.

Strengthening empathy, building safe online and offline communities, enhancing media literacy, and ensuring meaningful accountability for technology platforms are essential steps toward reducing risk and fostering safer environments for youth.

Humane Canada is grateful to those organizations who participated in this study and shared their knowledge and expertise in this area.



CITATIONS

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- 4 [Of Animals and Objects; Studying violence toward women and animals can help us develop strategies to prevent both](#)
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- 10 [Extreme online violence targeting girls on the rise, Canadian Centre for Child Protection data shows – protectchildren.ca](#)
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- 12 [About Us — Next Gen Men](#)
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- 14 [WiseGuyz Programs - Centre for Sexuality](#)
- 15 [John Howard Society of Ottawa](#)
- 16 [Boys are at Risk. White Ribbon](#)
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This report explores emerging forms of online radicalization affecting Canadian youth, emphasizing violent, misogynistic, and nihilistic online networks that target boys and young men while increasingly harming girls and young women; and the role that animal abuse plays as an often-overlooked red flag.



BEYOND PROMISING PRACTICES

EXAMINING ROOT CAUSES OF ONLINE RADICALIZATION

