

Beyond Promising Practices: Examining Root Causes of Online Radicalization



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

Thank you to our Funder

Humane Canada is incredibly grateful to **Women and Gender Equality Canada** for their continued support for women and their animals experiencing gender-based violence.



Women and Gender Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada



*“Hearing about violence towards animals...
the one thing that I gathered from that when it
was happening was just the control aspect of
trying to gain or wanting that feeling of 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”

Executive Summary

This report explores the role of animal abuse in 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. It highlights early exposure to harmful ideologies, rising online violence beginning around age 11, strong ties to trauma, isolation, and algorithm-driven harmful content, and the overlooked but critical role of animal abuse as an early red flag.

This type of violence could also be considered an emerging form of technologically facilitated gender-based violence. 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 and NeedHelpNow.ca from June 2022 to December 2025, 70 of those reports were made in the past twelve months, with girls accounting for 84% of the victims when the gender was known.^[1]

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. Interviewees reported that many girls are increasingly drawn into violence-focused subcultures online such as True Crime communities and the 764 network.

Interventions such as empathy-building, animal-assisted education, digital literacy, and stronger tech regulation are emphasized as essential to prevention.



[1] Extreme online violence targeting girls on the rise, Canadian Centre for Child Protection data shows
- protectchildren.ca

Key Findings

1. Violent behaviours online begin early and escalate through adolescence.
2. Online spaces normalize aggression, misogyny, and animal torture.
3. Girls are increasingly both targeted and involved in violent online subcultures.
4. Animal harm is used as a tool for desensitization and domination, and should be considered a red flag for escalating violence.
5. Algorithmic amplification accelerates exposure to harmful content.
6. Youth seek belonging online, creating vulnerability to recruitment.

*“Sometimes I'll be scrolling through Facebook myself and the amount of like videos that I have seen that are just like grotesque against animals just and I constantly report it. But you know, there's been times and I'm like almost 30 and I've seen some, I've seen some sh*t.*”

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, I can't even imagine how other 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”

Methodology

Study respondents reported widespread online violence, patterns of grooming that is similar to sexual exploitation and coercive tactics as found in gender-based violence, and an overlap between violent networks and animal abuse content.

SURVEY

26 qualitative survey responses

INTERVIEWS

Interviews with five Canadian organizations

SECTORS

Youth work, online safety research, law enforcement, and healthy masculinity initiatives

Demographics

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.

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 Canadian Violence Link Coalition (CVLC) and National Centre for the Prosecution of Animal Cruelty (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.

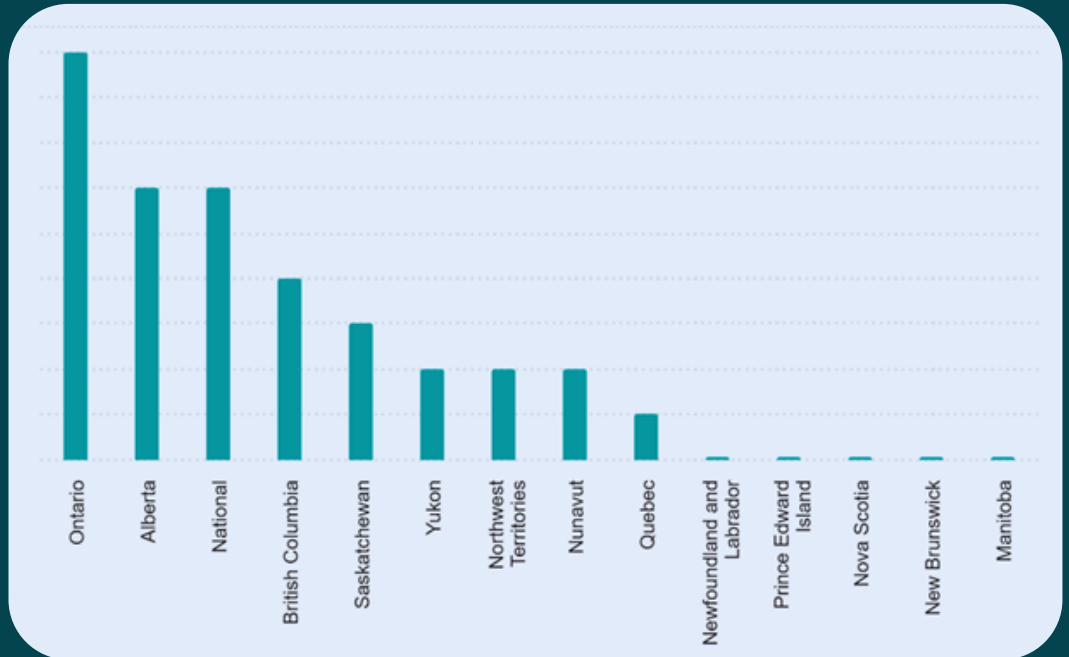
Respondents were asked about their organization affiliation (optional), which provinces their organizations served or whether they were national and in what regions they offered services: urban, rural, remote, Indigenous communities, and Northern Canada.

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

People working in Ontario and Alberta-based organizations had the highest response rate

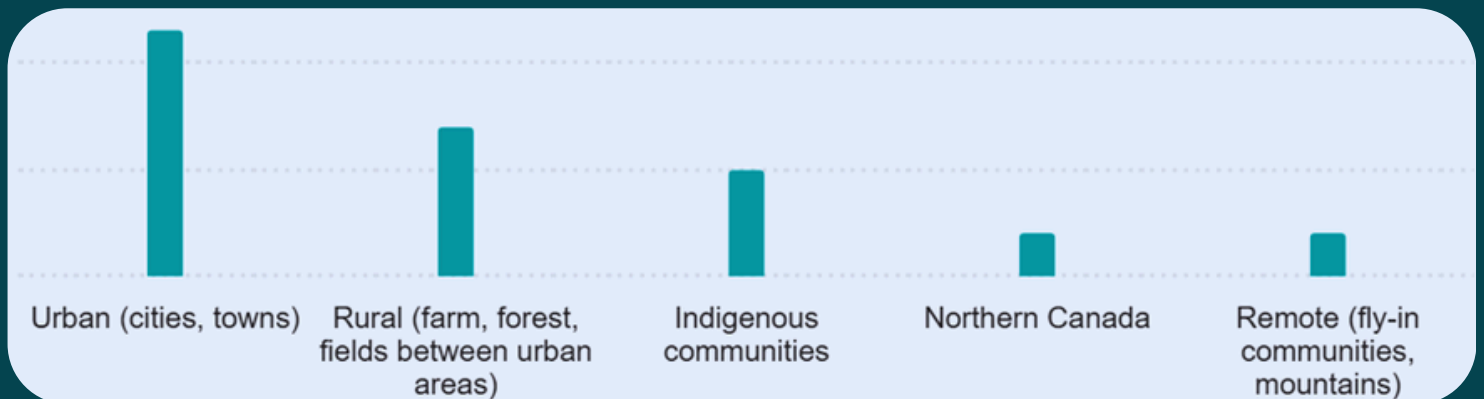
Most of the responses came from organizations that served Ontario, followed by Alberta and national organizations.



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

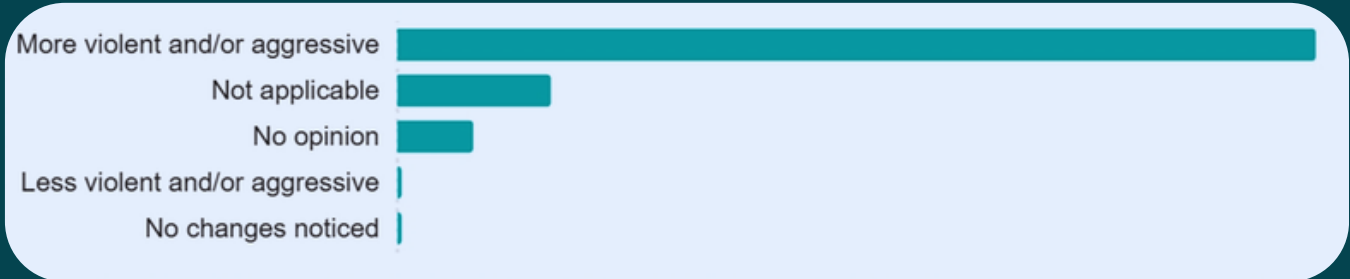
Regions

All survey respondents (100%) reported that their organizations serve urban areas. However, many survey participants indicated that rural (61%) and Indigenous (43%) communities also fell within their organization's scope.



Survey results

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



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

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



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

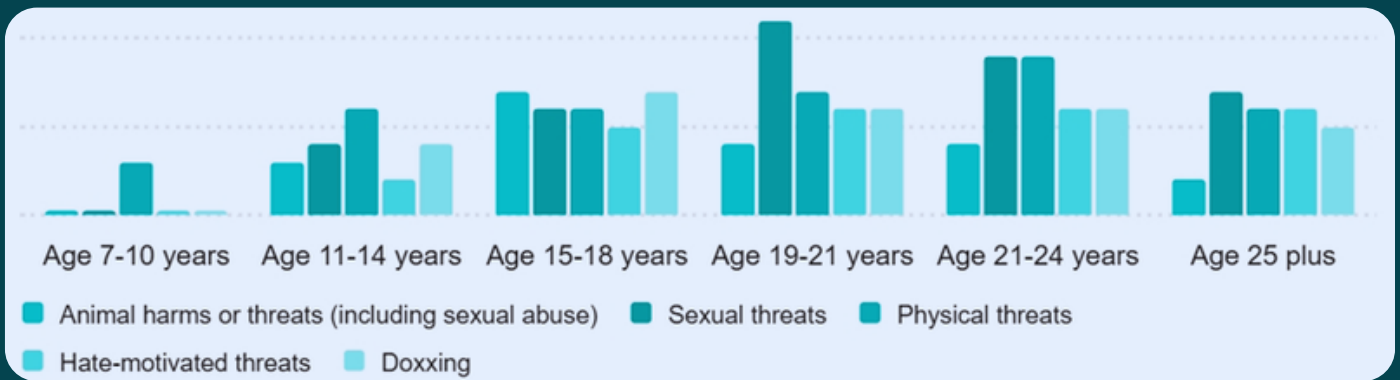
Animal harms ranked sixth behind hate-motivated violence, sexual violence, doxxing (posting personal information online as harassment), and physical violence. One finding of interest that emerged was the higher ranking of direct observations of violent conduct where the respondent has seen an individual coercing a victim in a violent manner, and depictions of third party sexual or physical violence, such as gore or hurtcore^[1] 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](#)

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

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.

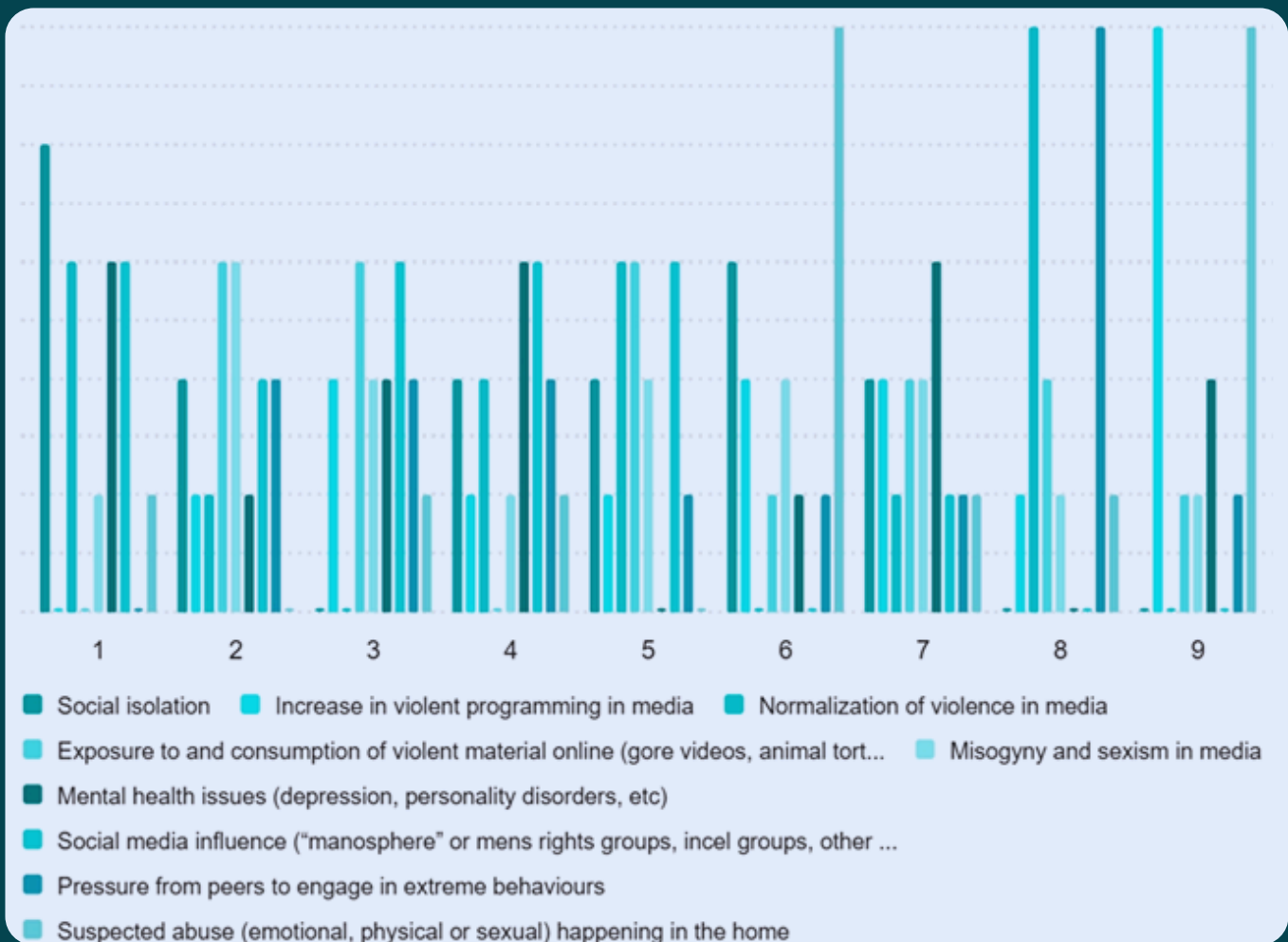


These results indicate that the risk of animal harms or threats begin to rise between ages 11 to 14, then peaks from ages 15 to 18 where it ranks the highest alongside doxxing, before dropping slightly and plateauing from ages 19 through 24. Sexual and physical violence also rank highest among all forms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

“I think in a world where we're trying to be more inclusive, we're creating more divide between people and getting people more angry at each other in different groups, which just makes it so much harder to care”

Based on your work, research or own online experiences, what factors do you feel may be contributing to recent radicalization toward violence in young men or boys?

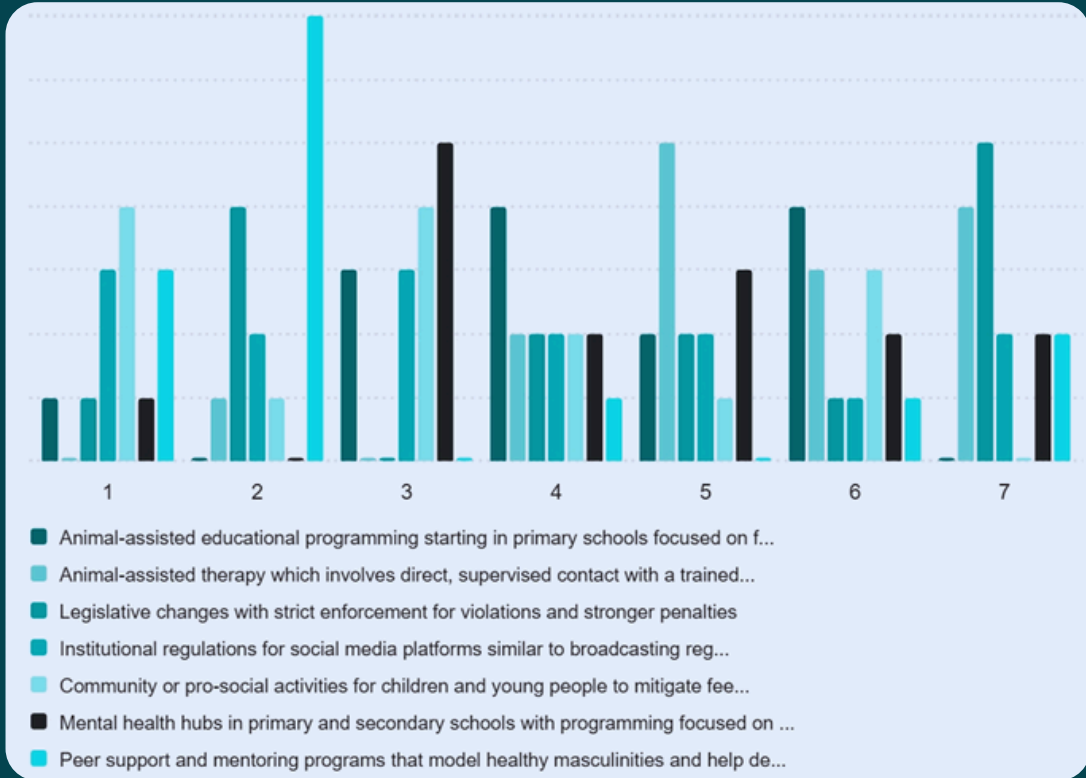


The survey then switched from types of violence seen online to what respondents feel may be contributing factors driving young men and boys to engage in violent behaviour and possible radicalization, ranked from one being highest likely to nine being lowest.

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.

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

As follow-up to the previous question about risk or contributing factors, the survey then asked for respondents' opinions on possible intervention strategies.



Pro-social community activities to help mitigate feelings of isolation and peer support programs that model healthy masculinities and help develop tools to stand up against violence were ranked highest, as were mental health hubs in primary and secondary schools where programming is focused on the internet and psychological safety and that offer students a safe place to air concerns.

Animal-assisted educational programming starting in primary school to foster empathy through contact with animals and a 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 replied

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.



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.

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.

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.

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 in being more impactful*” and suggests these issues could be addressed organically “*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.

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Another response to this question 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 or 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.

Lack of hope and purpose, lack of material resources. Like just hearing some of the stories of these youth, they grew up in environments where like everybody failed them. Nobody cared. They were left, you know, no food, no housing, abusive families...

Youth unemployment is at an all time high. Like it's hard enough because they're not going to make the kind of money they would make doing some of these other things but if there's not even another job to begin with... what's the motivation?

Themes & Analysis

“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”

Interviews offered selected 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.

“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.”

Adolescent boys (ages 13–18) are most at risk, reflecting both developmental vulnerability and targeted recruitment.

Girls, however, are also increasingly involved—often first as victims before becoming perpetrators.

Animal abuse appears across violent networks as both a grooming tool and a predictor of broader violence.

Youth are drawn to violent online spaces due to loneliness, trauma, and lack of belonging. Algorithms reinforce these pathways by creating echo chambers.

“Loneliness is the primary driver and they find a community and we don't really have spaces for young men to find that belonging outside of that.

Pickup artists, men's rights activists, like all of those. They all offer different things.”



Prevention & Intervention Strategies

“My favorite quote, which is from Little Fires Everywhere by Celeste Ng, which is you didn't make good choices, you had good choices.”

And I thought about that a lot last week [at a justice-related event] because there were some more police types who were like, they're making poor choices... It's like, are they?”



Empathy-building, particularly through animal-assisted education, emerged as one of the strongest upstream interventions.



Community-building programs, digital literacy, cross-platform information sharing, and robust tech regulation are also essential.



Experts stressed meeting youth where they are—online—rather than relying solely on offline interventions.

Recommendations

“If the problems are with boys online, the solutions should be with boys online”

1. **Build Safety** Build safe online and offline communities that promote connection

2. **Expand Empathy** Expand humane education and empathy-focused programming.

“Animal therapy—not therapy, but sort of like early education—empathy-based classes involving animals would be super important. I think that's a great idea for 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.”

3. **Improve Literacy** Improve digital literacy and counter harmful narratives.

4. **One Health Approach** Use One Health approaches integrating human, animal, and environmental wellbeing.

5. **Stronger Regulations** Strengthen regulatory oversight of tech platforms.

Conclusion

Youth radicalization is a growing public health and public safety concern.

While the victimization crosses gender lines, this type of violence could qualify as a form of technologically facilitated gender-based violence because it disproportionately targets girls and young women.

However, the double victimization created from being targeted for recruitment and then becoming a recruiter for these online violent networks is not limited by gender.

Cross-sector collaboration, early empathy-based education, stronger regulation, and recognition of animal abuse as a key warning sign are essential to preventing escalation in harmful behaviours and protecting vulnerable youth.

“I think teaching empathy is something that's lacking because again we're kind of very depersonalized, especially the kids now they're always on their phone.

And this idea of empathy is literally fading away...”



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