

2022

EXPERT BRIEFING SERIES

VIOLENT RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM: CHILDREN'S
PERSPECTIVES, POLICY AND PRACTICE

CRTG
WORKING GROUP

crtgroup.org



ABOUT CRTG WORKING GROUP

The premier international nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the rights and well-being of children at risk, victims and survivors of terrorist recruitment and use. The CRTG Working Group existence and work is both critical and groundbreaking for children affected by terrorism and to withstand the intergenerational perpetuation of terrorist cycles of violence.

ABOUT THIS EX POST PAPER

On April 7, 2022 the CRTG Working Group hosted an Expert Briefing on Violent Right-Wing Extremism: Children's Perspectives, Policy and Practice by Mr. Robert Örell, EU Radicalisation Awareness Network. The purpose of this paper is to offer a series of recommendations to policy-makers and practitioners responsible for preventing and countering child radicalization to Right-Wing Extremism (RWE). This guidance is the result of shared insights, lessons learned, practical examples and policy recommendations from the joint meeting between the CRTG Working Group and Mr. Robert Örell.

LICENSING AND DISTRIBUTION

CRTG Working Group publications are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial No Derivatives License, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 05** DEFINING THE RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST ENVIRONMENT
- 06** REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS
- 07** PREVENTION PROGRAMS
- 08** FAMILY ASSISTANCE
- 10** GENDER CONSIDERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

On April 7, 2022 the CRTG Working Group hosted an Expert Briefing on Violent Right-Wing Extremism: Children's Perspectives, Policy and Practice by Mr. Robert Örell, EU Radicalisation Awareness Network. In recent years, Europe and the United States have experienced a revival of militant right-wing extremist groups, networks, and incidents, with a surge of anti-immigration and Islamophobic violence, as well as anti-government attacks and assaults on political opponents, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ Community. While this is not a new phenomenon, with a 320% increase in attacks conducted by individuals affiliated with such movements and ideologies over the past five years, as reported by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate Trends Alerts, its current manifestation and scale heighten a sense of insecurity, alarmism and the urgency of designing and implementing comprehensive responses to effectively curb its growing frequency, and lethality. In the pursuit of politically motivated aims, right-wing extremists, drawing on international networks, ideas and personalities, continue to mobilize others and demonstrate an exceptional capacity to spread propaganda, magnify their message and ultimately outreach and recruit children and youth. The demographic of supporters of white supremacist, national socialist, neo-Nazi and other related groups embracing similar ideologies is increasingly younger. The rising tide of right-wing extremism and its leverage on children and youth calls for an identification of the factors driving radicalization as well as pathways to effectively support their disengagement.

The CRTG Working Group equips policymakers, professionals and practitioners with the tools necessary to understand and respond to violence against children in terrorism. We build support for good governance that enables child protection in terrorism. We engage directly with a range of stakeholders to seek and share information, build awareness and encourage positive action for children.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a series of recommendations to policy-makers and practitioners responsible for preventing and countering child radicalization to Right-Wing Extremism (RWE). This guidance is the result of shared insights, lessons learned, practical examples and policy recommendations from the joint meeting between the CRTG Working Group and Mr. Robert Örell. It is divided into the following five sections: (i) the right-wing extremist environment; (ii) rehabilitation and reintegration programs; (iii) prevention programs; (iv) family assistance; (v) gender considerations.

DEFINING THE RIGH-WING EXTREMIST ENVIRONMENT

Right-wing extremism (RWE) is a diverse environment with ideas that both interlink and diverge within the movement. The main elements are the perception of superiority, uniqueness, an imminent threat and conspiracy theories justifying and urging action against it. The idea of superiority can relate to different aspects of RWE. For some ideological interpretations, it is the white race, for others the ethnicity, nation or culture. The threat is explained differently depending on the orientation of the ideology. For many RWE groups, the narrative builds on a conspiracy theory that there is a Jewish elite covertly ruling the world with the aim of annihilating the white race, for others, it is the conspiracy theory that the politicians in power are aiming to covertly Islamify the West. RWE groups justify the use of violence towards their enemies and towards people and institutions in power with the motivation that the preservation of the white race is superior to individual lives. Children are seen as especially important to RWE groups both as pure, unindoctrinated beings with free and uncorrupted will and as the future for the preservation of the white race.

REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS

Children associated with RWE groups require special care and support to be effectively reintegrated and become constructive members of society. These children may have experienced trauma, violence, strong disconnection from or rejection by society, or they may face stigma. The diverse personal circumstances of children, as well as their different contexts, make the design of effective reintegration programs a complex endeavor, which requires the commitment and cooperation of a variety of institutions and actors.

01. Recommendation: Consider individually adapted, age-sensitive and development-sensitive responses.

Children engaging with RWE groups are not a homogeneous group but represent a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, motivations and complex needs. In order to be effective, P/CVE interventions should be grounded on a primary identification and assessment of children's needs. Failure to appropriately identify and assess needs and tailor responses may have lasting and harmful effects on children and undermine opportunities to afford adequate treatment and care. Additionally, early childhood trauma may cause cognitive impairments and lead to incongruities between children's development and anagraphic age. Developmentally sensitive responses are therefore also recommended in P/CVE interventions involving children.

02. Recommendation: Develop and implement multi-agency, multi-systemic and trauma-informed interventions.

The involvement of children with RWE groups is guided by a multitude of diverse and multi-dimensional factors impacting not only the individual child but also families and communities. Accordingly, multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary and multi-systemic approaches to P/CVE, rather than ad hoc or disconnected service provision, are best suited to reflect the complexities of extremism and to enable holistic responses. Trauma therapy is also a critical component of effective P/CVE efforts and to the development of positive trajectories. Adverse childhood experiences, environmental stressors and social ecology disruptions are often associated with the development of anti-social and harmful behaviors or negative emotional responses leading to increased vulnerabilities to radicalization to violent extremism. Trauma pre-exists radicalization to violent extremism and compounds during association.

PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Since the growth of terrorist movements and organizations in the Middle East during the 1980s and 1990s, followed by the 9/11 attack, the term terrorism has become synonymous with Islamic radicalism. At the same time, other types of violent extremism have been relatively neglected. The increasing involvement of children with RWE groups highlights the need for adequate preventative measures. Additionally, the current discourse on violent extremism largely focuses on young adults, thereby overlooking key drivers, influences and causal pathways that are specific to children including heightened vulnerability to polarized messages and cognitive development.

03. Recommendation: Increase awareness and understanding of child involvement with violent extremism and violent extremist environments.

In order to be efficient, it is critical that all policies and interventions aimed at protecting children against radicalization are evidence-based. To this end, policymakers are encouraged to invest in specialized research into the modus operandi, tactics and patterns of violent extremist groups punctuating the recruitment and radicalization of children, both boys and girls.

04. Recommendation: Acknowledge and explore the potential of online interventions.

Online sociability is an integral part of children's consumption of technological tools. Internet, mobile access and communication have produced a number of changes in social communication patterns, including a dilation from physical to digital spaces of interaction and a consistent parallelism between interpersonal relations online and offline. Ultimately, online and offline social relationships appear increasingly equivalent and overlapping. RWE groups outreach to children by creating online environments, sometimes defined as "virtual communities" or "radical milieus", entailing dynamics of support and socialization. RWE groups further the development of offline antisocial behaviors including self-isolation, alienation and marginalization to recruit and radicalize in transnational digital communities. Recognizing the importance of connections through digital environments, online interventions efforts may prevent radicalization to violence by proactively engaging with children at risk, strengthen resilience and offer alternative frames of interpretation.

FAMILY ASSISTANCE

Families and children are increasingly confronted with challenges posed by RWE movements and radicalization. The crucial role of families in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is widely recognized. Close relatives may shape attitudes toward non-violence, identify early signs of radicalization and provide early responses and interventions. However, while the importance of family-centered programs is recognized, engaging with parents or caregivers may present challenges, including risk management, credibility and identification of opportunities for intervention. In some circumstances, family environments may also be detrimental, particularly when the parent-child relationship is absent, difficult or when parents or caregivers are the primary agents in the intergenerational transmission of extremist beliefs.

05. Recommendation: Build awareness of violent radicalization signs by offering robust education.

Families are oftentimes insufficiently equipped with knowledge or tools to understand or address violent extremism and radicalization. In some instances, family members may be able to identify early signs of radicalization to violent extremism, however early detection may be challenged by the fast evolution of radicalization processes or by existing analogies between early indicators of radicalization with other challenges including trauma, depression, addiction, discrimination or marginalization, among others. Consistent educational programs addressing early detection, child vulnerability, online safety and social media use and dialogue may build family capacity building in intervention and responses.

06. Recommendation: Provide safe mechanisms for reporting early signs of radicalization.

Mechanisms for reporting early signs of radicalization and/or access to professional support and advice are presently limited and oftentimes law enforcement agencies represent the only available support system. Safe, non-judgmental, non-inquisitive and confidential channels to report early signs of radicalization, share concerns or obtain guidance should be provided and rendered increasingly available.

07. Recommendation: Recognize the role of families and family environments as a risk or protective factor.

Families have been traditionally understood as central institutions within society and primary references within children's social ecology. Increasingly, families are considered a priority target for cooperative and inclusive P/CVE interventions. However, families - as "life spheres" - can contribute both as a risk and protective factor to radicalization dynamics and shifts towards violent extremism. Close relatives may in fact be the conduit for the transmission of positive attitudes and

beliefs as well as others based on intolerance, hatred and violence or otherwise extremist in nature. In such cases - or whereas a positive family environment for the child is absent - P/CVE intervention may be more difficult and require the development of strategies aiming at equipping the child with core competencies and abilities in conflict management, critical thinking and emotional intelligence without creating further polarization, friction or fragmentation within the family environment.

GENDER CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the recognition of RWE as a male-dominated environment and the traditional underrepresentation of women and girls within it, violent extremism is a transnational challenge which is not restricted to any nationality, ethnicity, religion, ideology or gender. While encompassed by gender dimensions, notions of masculinity and femininity and an emphasis on biological attributes and gender norms, in recent years, the involvement of women and girls in RWE has become increasingly evident across the entire spectrum of groups, movements and networks espousing far-right ideologies.

08. Recommendation: Incorporate a robust gender analysis in P/CVE efforts and interventions.

Despite the increasing recognition of the involvement of women and girls in RWE groups and the diversity of factors leading to radicalization to violent extremism between genders, a tendency to overlook and underestimate pathways of engagement and female roles remains substantial. A robust gender- analysis is required at all stages of P/CVE policy and programming in order to underline gender differences and inequalities. Effective policy, activities and programs must rely on gender- sensitive research and gender-disaggregated data.

09. Recommendation: Apply gender mainstreaming to strengthen the effectiveness of P/ CVE efforts and respect for human rights.

Appreciating that if the goal of P/CVE interventions is to improve the lives of all people, women and men, girls and boys, as well as individuals of bodily characteristics, diverse sexual orientation and/or diverse or plural gender identities, no gender-neutral strategies and interventions exist. As such, gender mainstreaming or the mainstreaming of gender perspectives should be applied in the development of policy, measures and programs preventing and countering violent extremism.