

Intervention Options for Minors Vulnerable to Violent Extremism Activity

Some minors¹ may be particularly vulnerable to violent extremist messaging that appeals to a variety of developmental and psychological needs, such as a desire for a sense of belonging and identity or attention seeking through rebellion. Legally, law enforcement faces investigative challenges in terrorism investigations when dealing with minors, highlighting the need for robust early intervention and terrorism prevention options.²

- Adolescents are prone to taking risks and are in the developmental stage of identity exploration, looking for answers to questions about who they are and will become. They may be attracted to the sense of rebellion that violent extremist groups offer as well as promises that joining their cause will provide belonging and purpose.
- The Department of Justice (DOJ) is limited in its ability to transfer juveniles to adult status in federal court, restricting the US Government's (USG) ability to prosecute juvenile offenders on material support to terrorism charges. While minors may be federally charged under the Juvenile

Delinquency Act (JDA), the JDA's certification and timeline requirements pose significant challenges for the USG. Further, given the rehabilitative intent of the JDA, juvenile criminal proceedings generally do not result in stringent sentences for juvenile offenders. Given the challenges posed in the federal system, juvenile offenders are generally arrested, charged, and prosecuted by state authorities. If arrested (and based on the severity of the crime(s) committed), a minor may be transferred to a legal guardian or may be held in state custody.³ The limitations on federal prosecutions of minors pose challenges for protecting sensitive sources and investigative techniques that are afforded by federal law pursuant to the Classified Information Procedures Act, as similar protections may not be available under state laws.

SCOPE: This product provides awareness to law enforcement and public safety personnel of the potential mobilization of minors to violence and tools to aid in terrorism prevention.

ENTICED MINORS JOINING VIOLENT

EXTREMIST GROUPS: Whether COVID-19 isolation-related or simply an increased use of social media by minors, minors' susceptibility to terrorist messaging continues.

In May 2021, a 14-year-old was arrested for allegedly being involved in preoperational activities. Authorities found the teen's online profile, which contained information on bombmaking and photos of potential improvised explosives.

¹ Minors, also known as juveniles, are persons under the age of 18 and under the care of a parent or guardian, unless emancipated.

² The indicators of violent extremist mobilization are observable behaviors that might help determine whether individuals or groups are preparing to engage in violent extremist activities, such as conducting an attack or traveling overseas to join a foreign terrorist organization.

³ In some instances, a minor may be charged as an adult depending on the severity of the terrorist-related activity.

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MOBILIZATION INDICATORS AND SUSPICIOUS INCIDENT REPORTING:

First responders, classmates, family members, friends, neighbors, school staff, and religious mentors should be well versed in indicators of mobilization and reporting mechanisms. Minors may face unique age-related challenges during mobilization, although they typically still display indicators found in the *Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Handbook (2019 Edition)*.

- For example, minors may have difficulty obtaining travel documents, so they may try to use fake or stolen documents or consider supporting violent extremist causes in other ways. They may also have difficulty funding an attack because of limited financial resources (lack of jobs), possibly influencing money-related crimes (stolen goods for cash or theft of money).
- Encouraging bystanders to document and report potential suspicious activities—to include observed behavior reasonably indicative of preoperational planning related to terrorism or other criminal activity—to law enforcement, parents, school authorities, or specialized nonprofit companies may assist terrorism prevention efforts and investigations. Ideally, suspicious activity reporting mechanisms should include local law enforcement, FBI Field Offices, the Joint Terrorism Task Forces, and state or local fusion centers.

CONSIDERATIONS: To counter the recruitment of susceptible minors and aid prevention, general considerations for all first responders and bystanders should include the following:

- Conduct interagency and community training and education to reinforce awareness and aid in terrorism prevention.

PREVENTION THROUGH IDENTIFICATION AND REPORTING:

Strong relationships with the student body, school administration, and law enforcement—combined with an awareness of mobilization indicators—may lay the groundwork for early interception of terrorist planning.

In November 2019, students discovered a notebook belonging to their classmate containing details of a plot and passed it to school administrators, who then contacted law enforcement, averting a potential terrorist attack.

VIOLENT EXTREMISTS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO EXPAND REACH TO MINORS:

Violent extremists are using popular social media applications to target minors—such as Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok—for recruitment. As with all social media, the use of these platforms is not itself inherently suspicious.

- TikTok is a Chinese-owned, video-sharing platform that launched in the US in 2017. It has more than 800 million monthly users, roughly 41% of whom are between the ages of 16 and 24, and is growing in popularity among US teens.
- TikTok's application layout and algorithms can unintentionally aid individuals' efforts to promote violent extremist content, specifically through its "For You Page" that shows content—based on the user's application activity and interactions—from accounts the user may not follow. A user's account may have zero followers but may have substantial viewership on some videos, potentially aiding violent extremist TikTok users in evading the application's content moderation efforts.



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- Establish a basic understanding of indicators that are common in those mobilizing to violence.
- Leverage community members to identify those engaged in behaviors or activities related to potential mobilization to violence.
- Assess common factors of mobilization to violence frequently seen among minors, including searching for an identity or a sense of belonging, being a victim of bullying, anger issues, propensity to violence, a sense of rebellion, past exposure to violence or trauma, a desire for extreme adventure, or an appeal to violent extremist narratives.
- Engage school resource officers (SROs) who may be able to identify current, popular trends among minors, and who have more flexibility and authority to interview, question, or search.
- Work with school administrators to gain familiarity with their policies related to user agreements and the expectation of privacy regarding school-issued laptops or other electronic devices, which may provide first responders with insight into a student of concern's online activities.
- Understand local, state, and federal laws with respect to cases involving minors; engage early with state attorneys regarding these investigations to ensure all available resources are used appropriately.
- Perform school outreach to help identify and address psychological and social vulnerabilities, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, or other stressors that minors may face that make them potentially more susceptible to terrorist messaging.

TEENAGE COGNITIVE COMPLEXITIES: Based on the stage of their brain development, minors are:

- *More likely to:* act on impulse, misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions, be involved in risky behavior or fights, and engage in dangerous or risky behavior.
- *Less likely to:* think before they act, pause to consider the consequences of their actions, change their dangerous or inappropriate behaviors.

AGE RISK FOR VIOLENCE: The highest risk for participation in serious violence, not specific to violent extremism, occurs between ages 16 and 17; after age 17, violence participation drops dramatically, and about 80 percent of those who are violent during adolescence will terminate their violence by age 20.

THE ADULT VS. TEENAGE BRAIN

Adult Frontal Lobe

- Judgment, decision making
- Reasoning, problem solving
- Impulse control and emotion control

Teenage Frontal Lobe

- Underdeveloped as the brain matures back to front
- Last part of the brain to mature (at about 24 years of age; males and females differ)
- This occurs during a time they are trying to form their own identity



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- Encourage healthy social outlets through family members, peers, and governmental social and mental health services to build protective factors;⁴ which include extracurricular activities, volunteer programs, youth groups, and employment opportunities.
- Integrate with existing multidisciplinary threat assessment and threat management (TATM) teams to proactively share information regarding students of concern or other potential threats and develop targeted management strategies for those engaged in illicit or illegal behaviors; TATM teams may include, but are not limited to, SROs, school counselors and administrators, law enforcement, and individuals from social resource programs.
- Utilize various nonprofit organizations with resources and services to assist schools and families in countering violent extremist narratives; for example, a nonprofit organization created a toolkit for schools to educate teachers about indicators regarding a minor adopting a violent extremist ideology and possible steps to counter violent extremist narratives.

EARLY OUTREACH IS KEY TO PREVENTING MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE AND DISENGAGEMENT:

Preventing mobilization to violence is not only about recognizing risk but also about inoculating minors against possible recruitment efforts. Minors—particularly during teenage years when their mental traits and functions have not yet matured—who are persistently exposed to violent extremist ideology are probably more vulnerable to mobilization than many adults because of their immature cognitive and moral development. Disengaging and rehabilitating extremist minors from a violent extremist path requires an age-appropriate and multidisciplinary approach.

- Disengagement⁵ and rehabilitation⁶ aim to restore healthy childhood development and help reintegrate minors into society while addressing the vulnerabilities that led to their mobilization to violence. These vulnerabilities, which may be exploited by violent extremists, include: a need for certainty and identity, a lack of physical security, family and social networks permissive of violent extremist ideology, and increased online social interaction.
- Programs with disengagement and rehabilitation tailored to these vulnerabilities have been successful in countering mobilization to violence among minors and may be established at the local level, bringing together law enforcement, community leaders, families, and NGOs.

⁴ Protective factors are those issues that mitigate the risk of an individual engaging in extremism, such as individual resilience and positive family and peer networks.

⁵ Disengagement is the process by which an individual stops engaging in violent extremist behavior.

⁶ Rehabilitation is the process that repairs an individual's relationship with society by replacing socially destructive behavior patterns.



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RESOURCES

INTERAGENCY

- **SCHOOLSAFETY.GOV** is a joint venture by DHS, US Department of Education (ED), DOJ, and the HHS to share actionable recommendations to keep school communities safe. <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/protect-and-mitigate/emergency-planning>
- **SAFE SCHOOLS/HEALTHY STUDENTS INITIATIVE** is a joint venture by ED, DOJ, and HHS to promote mental health and prevent youth violence. <https://healthysafechildren.org/grantee/safe-schools-healthy-students>
- **YOUTH.GOV** is composed of representatives from 21 federal agencies that support programs and services focused on youths. This website promotes the goals of positive health outcomes for youths by identifying evidence-based strategies, resources, and tools, including information on violence prevention. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/violence-prevention>
- **HOMEOWN VIOLENT EXTREMIST MOBILIZATION INDICATORS FOR PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONNEL - 2019 EDITION** is a joint FBI-NCTC-DHS initiative to provide mobilization indicators that an individual or group may be preparing to engage in violent extremist activities. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-newsroom/nctc-resources/item/1945-homegrown-violent-extremist-mobilization-indicators-2019>

CDC

- **VETO VIOLENCE** is a service from the CDC that provides free prevention information, trainings, and tools designed to empower communities to prevent violence and implement evidence-based prevention strategies. <https://vetoviolenace.cdc.gov/apps/main/home>
- **NATIONAL CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE IN YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION** (known as YVPCs or Youth Violence Prevention Centers) are collaborations with the academic community that advance the science and practice of youth violence prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/yvpc>
- **STRIVING TO REDUCE YOUTH VIOLENCE EVERYWHERE** is a national initiative led by the CDC to prevent youth violence. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/stryve>
- **A COMPREHENSIVE TECHNICAL PACKAGE FOR THE PREVENTION OF YOUTH VIOLENCE AND ASSOCIATED RISK BEHAVIORS** highlights strategies based on the best available evidence to help states and communities prevent or reduce youth violence. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-technicalpackage.pdf>
- **RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS** <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/riskprotectivefactors.html>

DHS

- **CENTER FOR PREVENTION PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS** works with communities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. <https://www.dhs.gov/CP3>
Some of its fact sheets include:
 - **Mitigating Negative Impacts of Social Isolation to Prevent Violence: Information for Parents and Educators of School-Aged Children** <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/mitigating-social-isolation-youth>
 - **Mitigating the Threat of School Violence as the US “Returns to Normal” from the COVID Pandemic and Beyond** <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/mitigating-threat-school-violence-us-returns-normal-covid-pandemic-and-beyond>



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- **Risk Factors and Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention** <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/risk-factors-and-targeted-violence-and-terrorism-prevention>
- **Building Peer-to-Peer Engagements** <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/building-peer-peer-engagements>
- **Threat Assessment and Management Teams** <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/threat-assessment-and-management-teams>
- **Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Online** <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/media-literacy-and-critical-thinking-online>

DOJ

- **OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION** aims to reduce youth crime and violence by supporting prevention and early intervention programs and, through research and programming, works to strengthen the nation's juvenile justice system. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/>

FBI

- **BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS UNIT/BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER (BTAC)** is a national level multiagency, multidisciplinary federal task force focused on the prevention of terrorism and targeted violence through the application of behaviorally-based operational support, training and research. BTAC provides support to FSLTT and campus law enforcement partners, as well as non-traditional partners, such as mental health, probation and parole, and social services.
- **THREAT MANAGEMENT COORDINATOR (TMC)**, a position in each FBI Field Office designated to work with law enforcement partners and community stakeholders on the coordination of efforts related to the prevention of terrorism and targeted violence. The TMC can provide training on threat assessment and threat management and coordinate requests for additional assistance on specific cases from BTAC. <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/>
- **MAKING PREVENTION A REALITY: IDENTIFYING, ASSESSING, AND MANAGING THE THREAT OF TARGETED ATTACKS** is a practical guide on assessing and managing the threat of targeted violence and contains concrete strategies to help communities prevent these types of incidents. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view>

US SECRET SERVICE (USSS)

- **AVERTING TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE: A USSS ANALYSIS OF PLOTS AGAINST SCHOOLS** is a 2021 study by the USSS National Threat Assessment Center that examines past disrupted plots and provides lessons learned. <https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2021-03/USSS%20Averting%20Targeted%20School%20Violence.2021.03.pdf>
- **PROTECTING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS: A USSS ANALYSIS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE** is a 2019 report that provides an unprecedented base of facts about school violence, as well as an updated methodology and practical guidelines for prevention. https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf
- **ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY USING A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL: AN OPERATIONAL GUIDE FOR PREVENTING TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE** is a 2018 guide that provides actionable steps that schools can take to develop comprehensive targeted violence prevention plans for conducting threat assessments in schools. https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2020-10/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide.pdf



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US HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

- **STOPBULLYING.GOV** provides information from various federal agencies on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how you can prevent and respond to bullying. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/>
- **SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION** funds a comprehensive array of grant programs for young people to stay connected to school and employment opportunities. Project AWARE and Safe Schools/Healthy Students are two grant programs that focus on comprehensive school mental health systems that include mental health promotion and prevention. <https://www.samhsa.gov/programs>

UN

- **A TEACHER'S GUIDE ON THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM** provides practical advice to educators on how and when to discuss the issue of violent extremism and radicalization with students. It was produced by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244676>
- **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME in the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre** aims to empower and enable youths to actively prevent and counter violent extremism on all levels in partnership with the UN. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/cct/youth-engagement-and-empowerment>

STATE OPERATED REPORTING PROGRAMS: A number of states have implemented state-operated reporting programs for community members, including students, to report concerning behaviors and threats of violence—whether ideologically motivated—through mobile app, phone, text, or website. Examples include:

- **Courage2Report Missouri** <https://www.mshp.dps.missouri.gov/MSHPWeb/Courage2ReportMO/index.html>
- **FortifyFL** <https://getfortifyfl.com/>
- **Kansas School Safety Hotline** <https://www.ksde.org/Agency/Fiscal-and-Administrative-Services/School-Finance/School-Bus-Safety/School-Safety-Hotline>
- **OK2SAY Michigan** <https://www.michigan.gov/ok2say/>
- **Safer Ohio School Tip Line** <https://ohioschoolsafetycenter.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/osscc/pre-k-12-schools/school-safety-resources/safer-ohio-school-tip-line>
- **Safe2Help Nebraska** <https://www.safe2helpne.org/>
- **Safe2Say Something Pennsylvania** <https://www.safe2saypa.org/>
- **Safet2Tell Colorado** <https://safe2tell.org/>





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