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REPORT

A black and white photograph of two young men standing on a concrete ledge. The man on the left is seen from the back, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, with his right arm raised holding a flag. The man on the right is also seen from the back, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, holding a flare that is emitting a plume of smoke. The background shows trees and a clear sky.

**Youth and
radicalisation**



What makes young people vulnerable to extremism, and how can this be addressed?

Young people have been identified as particularly likely to become involved in extremist movements, particularly boys and young men facing psycho-social challenges.

With a booming youth population in the global South, the issue of youth radicalisation is pressing.

This document will outline the factors behind youth radicalisation, as well as exploring insights for how this issue can be tackled.

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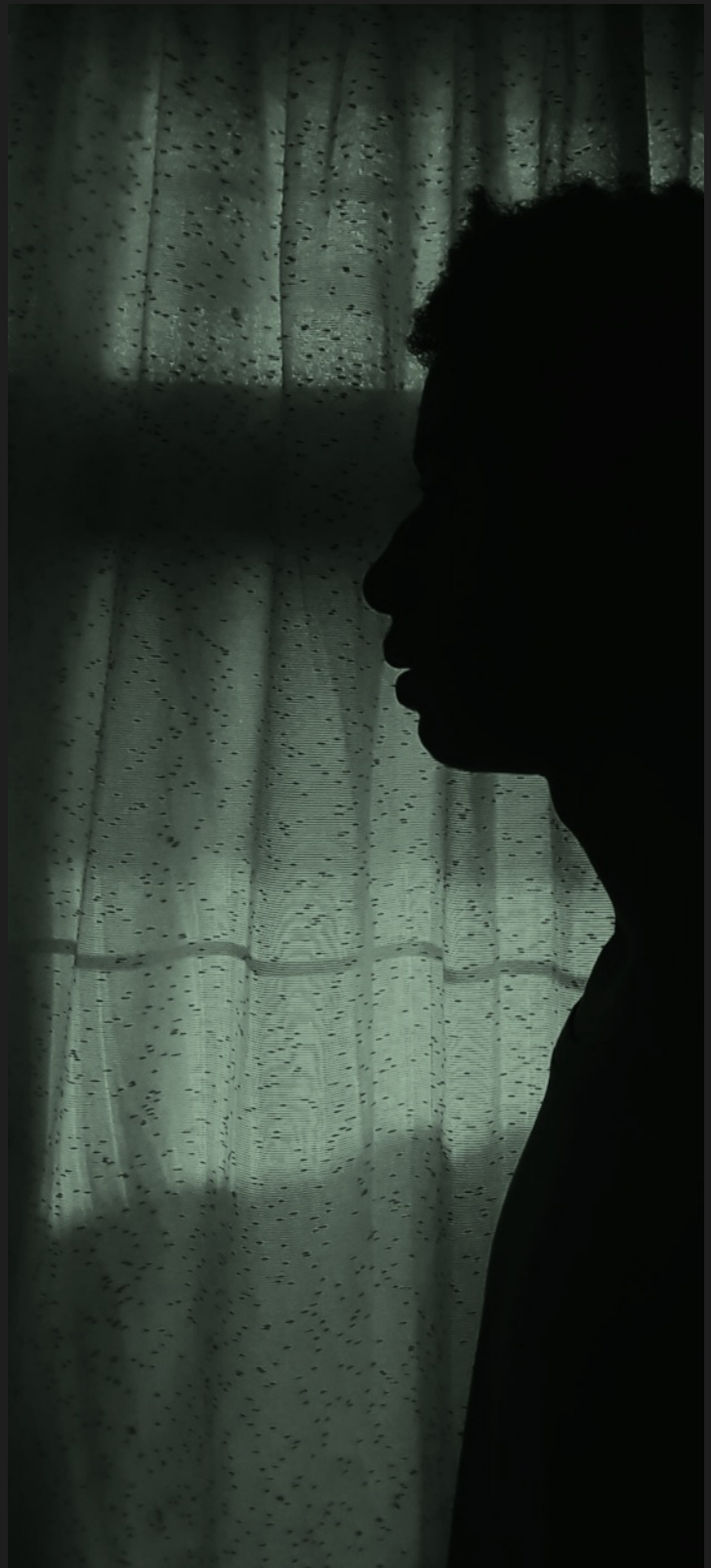


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Introduction

Our world is home to 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24, and the youth population is growing fastest in the poorest nations (Gupta et al., 2014).

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Violent extremists are overwhelmingly youthful (Silke, 2008) and a huge majority of them are male (Allan et al., 2015; Mwakimako, 2018).

Overwhelmingly, when we talk about radicalisation in the world today, we are talking about youth radicalisation. This represents a tiny proportion of a vast population of young people. Even in the absence of measures to prevent extremism, very few young people radicalise.

However, collectively, the tiny minority that do fall into radical belief systems have an oversized prominence due to the impact that a single terrorist can have.

There are suggestions that the risk of youth radicalisation is growing. In September 2021, Cressida Dick, commissioner for the UK's Metropolitan Police, indicated that the number of children suspected of terror-related offences had tripled in a year (Dearden, 2021). This phenomenon has drawn interest from UNESCO (Alava et al., 2017) and other agencies dealing with extremism.

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In Europe and East Asia, populations are ageing due to declining birthrates. Meanwhile, across Africa, the Middle East and South Asia there is a staggering demographic shift towards youth. More than half of Egypt's labour force is less than 30 years of age, and half of the population of Nigeria is between the ages of 15 and 34. Across the Middle East, 65 percent of the population are under of 30. These demographic trends towards an increasingly youthful population are set to become even more extreme with time (Lord, 2016).

Young people in the developing world have have a limited ability to meet their economic and psycho-social needs. The United Nations Population Fund (Gupta et al., 2014) warns of '[c]orrelations between high proportions of young people in populations and obstacles to development feed a vicious circle of poor life chances for the young.'

Over the last decade, the model of radicalisation in Europe has changed: radical groups are smaller, tend to be made up of 'home-grown' terrorists, and less structured – and involve younger males and more females than they had previously (Cachalia et al., 2016; Khosrokhavar, 2014). Campelo et al. (2018) note that there are similarities between the experiences of adolescence itself and the mechanisms of radicalisation, which indicates the susceptibility of young people to deviant and criminal behaviours during this transitional phase.

Youth – defined by the United Nations as the age between 15 and 24 – seems to present a particular opening of vulnerability to radicalisation. As Atran notes, individuals going through transitional phases in their lives are more likely to be attracted by ‘a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends’ (in Hasan, 2014) - as well as the prospect of creating wider social and political impact.

There is an increasing concern around the high numbers of young people who are susceptible to extremist messaging. This has been particularly visible after the so-called Islamic State has proven to be very attractive to young people across the world (Juergensmeyer, 2018) including those from comfortable backgrounds in the global North. Far-right extremists target youth with music, fashion and edgy humour (Miller-Idriss, 2017).

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In the global South, this intersects with the ‘youth bulge’ in the population, which presents a further challenge for those societies in which young people are often already dealing with various other social problems, from unemployment to the impacts of climate change. In Africa, Nigeria, Yemen and Somalia have particular issues with terrorism, but youth radicalisation is prevalent across Africa. Somalia, for instance, has been in a state of political crisis for three decades, meaning that all of country’s youth have grown up within an unstable state, with all of the social and psychological impacts that entails.

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While the profile of youth extremism tends to focus on boys and young men as the majority of those drawn towards extremism, a study conducted across the MENA region suggests that the drives towards extremism for women and girls are largely similar. Young women and girls were likely to seek adventure, and were more likely to romanticise their participation in extremist movements. Women also sought to escape strict gender roles in their society (USAID, 2015). By contrast, more men were attracted by the potential for violence they associated with engaging in extremism.

While there has been a focus upon radicalisation as a form of grooming, in which impressionable youth are exploited by recruiters, there is growing evidence that young people may be both self-radicalising and radicalising others.

Young people's agency

Often, young people are presented as if they were passive victims of grooming mechanisms, but the reality is that they may be active creators of extremist content, recruiters for and founders of extremist groups, and contributors to the finances of extremist groups (Rose & A, 2021).

Sugihartati et al (2020) describe this as a shift from 'consumers' to 'prosumers' – rather than absorbing extremist rhetoric, they are actively contributing to radicalisation discourses through the creation of original material. They indicate that university students in Indonesia were

actively engaged in creating and disseminating Islamist content online. As Pantucci (2011) observes 'The increasing prevalence of the internet and the easy availability of extremist material online have fostered the growth of the autodidactic extremist.' This is a territory in which young people have the skills to become 'self-starters' in the sphere of extremism.

Due to the ease of self-publishing on multiple platforms, from online platforms to graphic design software, it is now much easier for young people develop propaganda and create radical groups. ICSR research found that of the 10 extreme-right groups they surveyed, that they had emerged in or after 2018, and that the average ages of members was 25, or younger. Members of these groups had been arrested for crimes such as incitement to violence. One radical group in the UK was founded by a 16 year old boy, who has now been convicted for encouraging terrorism; another had been started by a 15 year old. Other European groups were found with similar age profiles (Rose & A, 2021).

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As digital natives, young people are skilled users of information technology, funnelling those interested in their messages from mainstream platforms like TikTok and Instagram to private platforms such as Telegram or Discord where they are able to operate with less fear of external moderation. This can even allow for the sharing of information related to planning terrorist attacks: through manuals for creating bombs and weapons. Their creations deploy edgy aesthetics,



similar to video games, likely to appeal to their own demographic. The presence of social media platforms allows radical groups to access young people who are not specifically looking for political content, providing an introduction into extremist thought – and promising more to follow via secure channels.

Another route into extremism for boys and young men is through sports and fitness. An interest in martial arts may indicate an insecurity around masculinity and feelings of vulnerability to attack. Sports also create a sense of group solidarity through participation.

Group solidarity and identity are extended through activism and merchandising – and merchandising T-shirts and other branded materials can provide a means of income for an organisation.

Risk factors

The radicalization of young people...is often due to hatred for the injustices experienced in one's life, the search for meaning for one's life, a sense of frustration, fragility and irrelevance (Victoroff & Kruglanski, 2009).

This section will cover some of the risk factors associated with radicalisation amongst young people.

Taking a 'life-course' approach from criminology, Cherney (2020) notes that the progression from childhood to adulthood involves a succession of transition points: from moving from one educational institution to another, finding a place in the job market, and leaving home. Each of these transition points can represent a point where a person's social and emotional network has been transformed. So, a young person who is confident in school might find themselves adrift at University; a person who leaves home after finding a job might find themselves lacking support in dealing with psycho-social crises. All of these risk factors may be exacerbated if that person lives in a community which is lacking in capacity to support them.

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If communities within which individuals live are likewise disorganised, dysfunctional or socially disconnected, or institutional authorities are perceived as having little legitimacy, this will affect the capacity of

families and schools to assert functional control and provide necessary social support. (Cherney, 2020)

Cherney illustrates this with a case study of Ahmad Numan Haider, a young man who attacked police officers. He explores how as Numan Haider lost contact with his family and in the process, became increasingly invested in narratives which claimed there was a clash of cultures between Islam and the West. This belief was fuelled by relationships with other radicalised young men and an increasingly hostile climate towards Muslims in Australia. Neve et al's (2020) study of youth from the Netherlands who went to Syria found that important factors were unstable families, unemployment, disengagement from education, previous records of delinquency – and then engagement with radicalised individuals and networks.

Botha (2014) argues that teenagers are particularly prone to radicalisation because they have strong emotional responses to perceived injustices and external political events. Adolescence is a transitional stage in development in which young people go through key developmental phases around their development of their social identities and their cognitive functioning. During this process, their interpersonal relationships have a strong influence upon their potential for criminality (Farrington et al., 2001; Lösel & Bender, 2017) which is likely to be similar to the process of radicalisation.

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Agnew (2010) suggests that radicalisation may spring from ‘collective strain’ which he relates to grievances related to societal injustice. While many people experience such injustices, few use violence to address their situation rather than enduring it or seeking legal means to effect change. It may be those who lack the capacity to address their means legitimately that present the greatest risk of radicalisation.

Despite risk factors proving very much in evidence when the trajectories of individual extremists are analysed, it must also be acknowledged that very many more individuals share these risk factors without presenting any risk to the public – and that stigmatising individuals who have these risk factors is likely to have a negative impact (Sarma, 2017). However, risk factors may be very useful for effecting social changes designed to reduce the likelihood of radicalisation at a collective level.

Individual factors

Individual factors that can make a person vulnerable to extremism include having an unstable identity and a lack of social integration (Schmid, 2013) – which may be particularly salient to youthful populations, who have not yet established their social position. Other potential risk factors include feelings of alienation, humiliation and relative deprivation.

Young people are in a state of identity formation, and as such, their identities can be unstable and susceptible to rapid changes. Those from particular backgrounds – such as those already facing challenges in establishing a strong sense of identity – may be more vulnerable. Those who consider themselves failures or who have undergone trauma may be even more so.

Depressive type feelings are often associated with youth radicalisation, although these are rarely officially diagnosed. Feelings of despair are particularly noted (Bouzar & Martin, 2016) suggesting that extremist ideology offers a distraction from a miserable life. Depression is more common amongst female adolescents than it is for males (Thapar et al., 2012). However, despite a current increase in young women and girls taking part in extremism, they remain a minority in the category over all.

While depression is not a complete explanation, it may well be an important indicator – which is particularly significant given that indications that adolescent depression is currently increasing (Mojtabai & Olfson, 2020).

The process of radicalisation is often connected with a sense of injustice, perceptions of discrimination and marginalisation, and a lack of social integration (Victoroff, 2005). These – as well as difficult experiences of migration – have been linked with depressive and other mental health conditions (Berg et al., 2011; Levecque & Van Rossem, 2015; Li, 2014;

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Tunnard et al., 2014; Veling et al., 2007). Low mood disorders are associated with suicidality and feelings of despair. Along with low self-esteem, this can lead to cognitive distortions, where everyday occurrences become viewed from a pessimistic perspective, as indicative of a hostile world (Patel, 2010). Such adaptations may be functional if they reflect real social and economic injustices; however, if these beliefs are unfounded or exaggerated, they may reflect a depressive condition. Bhui et al (2020) indicated that in the absence of adversity, depressive symptoms were indicative of a sympathy with the use of violent methods to achieve political aims

Other points of vulnerability include feelings of injustice and insecurity. Sommers (2019) identifies a particular insecurity amongst young men dubbed - 'failed masculinity' - a feeling of being unable to meet the social standards for obtaining adulthood within their communities through such lifecourse milestones as finding a job or a relationship. The number of young people who do not feel fully accepted into adulthood due an inability to meet these markers is increasing in number, and age (Eguavoen, 2010). Singerman (2007) describes this period as 'waithood' - a period of arrested development for those young people unable to progress to full adulthood due to an inability to complete standard rites of passage.

For men, this inability to take on the status of a full adult may feel emasculating. Ní Aoláin describes ISIS's 'hypermasculine' imagery in the contest of promised access to sexual partners, marriage, and income which provides a shortcut to the status of male adulthood. 'These motifs have proven indisputably alluring to marginalized men whose capacity to access any similar social capital or status in their own communities will be extremely limited,' she comments (Ní Aoláin, 2016). Distorted ideologies which fulfil such needs stand to attract vulnerable youth unable to achieve status through normative means.

Nivette et al (2021) note that for many young people, their level of support for extremism tends to decrease with time, with 5.3% reporting significant change in their support for violent extremism between the ages of 17 and 20; and over 75% reporting smaller, incremental attitudinal changes. This could coincide with increasing maturity, including the rejection of antisocial associates and increased emotional control. This research underlines the point that adolescence may be a key period for intervention, and that interventions at this stage of development are most likely to have long-term effects.

Environmental factors

Environmental impacts with the potential to increase the risk of radicalisation include an individual's family background and situation, their ethno-cultural identity, a lack of social cohesion in their community, belonging to a stigmatised group and/or a community with limited opportunities for young people.

Social networks are powerful influencers in the development of young people, shaping their identities, their social bonds and their cognitive patterns

Social networks are powerful influencers in the development of young people, shaping their identities, their social bonds and their cognitive patterns (Cherney, 2020). It is not always the case that young people are willingly drawn into radical networks. In fact, some may be coerced into joining radical groups through threats to themselves or to their loved ones, but thereafter may begin to share their values and perspectives.

Dhami and Murray (2016) identify curiosity as a major draw towards radical groups. They say that the most commonly perceived benefit of accessing information about violent extremist groups was expressed as gaining knowledge, awareness, and understanding about violent extremism. This may suggest that young people's curiosity around radicalisation might be best satisfied through providing unbiased information, rather than attempting to obscure the existence of extremist groups.

Groups become locations for sharing – and amplifying – a sense of grievance (Bazex & Mensat, 2016). Within such groups, young people are likely to connect with older individuals who serve as mentors and role models, drawing them further into radicalisation (Vidino, 2007). Having close associations with other people within radical movements is a known factor driving radicalisation (Malthaner, 2018; Thomson, 2018).

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Several studies have shown the importance of social networks, such as kinship and friendship networks in establishing links between individuals and organisations. Della Porta's (1988) studies of the Italian Red Brigades found that 45% of militants that she investigated had personal relationships with eight or more members of the group before they joined. Sageman (2004) has highlighted the critical role of social networks in Al Qaeda's recruitment, finding that 75% of the members he investigated had pre-existing ties to members of the organisation.

Ahmad (2016) provides a revealing study of the wide-scale penetration of Pakistan's educational sector by a single national-level Islamist organisation. He notes that many of the members of this organisation were initially drawn in by the promise of companionship, and did not develop radical beliefs until they were already embedded in the organisation – some have even been opposed to their aggressive campaigning, and 65% did not consider themselves particularly religious before joining the organisation. He describes an environment in which students were able to tyrannise other students and even academic staff

through imposing their understanding of Islam across universities in several regions of Pakistan. Given that young people may seek community, agency, self-esteem and a sense of purpose, it is clear how joining an extremist organisation can fulfil many of those needs – especially where there are few other means of doing so and where the organisation provides tangible power.

When community groups may actively promote extremism, others are poorly equipped to detect extremism or provide alternate ways for young people to meet their psychosocial needs. Some community leaders may actively marginalise young people, who respond by forming their own groups, animated by a sense of grievance (Sommers, 2019). For instance, first generation immigrant Imams may be unable to comprehend the struggles of second and later-generation youths have, in terms of handling the insecurities of growing up between cultures. and have little sympathy or understanding of their situations. This leads young people in search of community looking for answers outside the established communities – which may leave them vulnerable to extremist messaging.

Societal factors

Societal factors which may tend to increase the potential for radicalisation include exclusionary policies and legislation, human rights violations, social marginalisation and discrimination, and a lack of socio-economic opportunities for young people. These are particularly likely in times of crisis, such as prolonged conflicts, economic or migratory crises, and when disinformation flourishes. At a societal level, the interactions between groups and the state are very significant. These include tense minority-majority relations, which can become inflamed within the media and public opinion.

Other impacts may be heavy-handed responses to extremism by state forces. When persecution is meted out by state forces against vulnerable groups under the guise of counter-extremism, tensions increase and faith in the political order is diminished (Botha, 2014). For instance, over four thousand individuals were arrested as being part of Al Shabaab in Kenya, who were suspected of being Somalis. Over three thousand of these were Kenyans with no criminal records; many were undocumented immigrants and were deported from Kenya. This increased the sense of persecution experienced by youth in Kenya, particularly amongst those from minority groups, exacerbating an already tense situation. As Sommers (2019) notes, there is a direct relationship between states with

a predominantly youthful population and political repression, which in itself increases the likelihood of violent extremism.

While poverty has been implicated in terms of driving radicalisation, this has not been borne out in profiles of radicalised individuals, several of whom have been relatively privileged. Instead feelings of relative deprivation may be more telling. In the Arab world, for instance, a young person's expectations might dramatically outstrip the opportunities available to them (Taşpınar, 2009). Alongside relative deprivation, feelings of social and political exclusion are also risk factors towards radicalisation (Mikhael & Norman, 2018).

While religion has been implicated as a justification for extremism, and extremists movements may often couch their ideology in religious language, there is a danger in assuming that the relationship is straightforward. Kamenowski et al's (2021) research on a large sample of Swiss youth discovered that the most salient aspect of their faith – for both Christians and Muslims – was less their personal beliefs and positions, but how exclusionary and intolerant those beliefs were.

Implications

Given the importance of tackling youth radicalisation, there are several policy priorities. These includes centring youth issues and young people within the field of countering extremism, recognising the value of young people as agents in challenging radicalisation, improving the social fabric in ways which acknowledge the social, psychological and emotional needs of young people, and building young people's resilience to extremist narratives.

Mainstreaming youth

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Given the sheer demographic scale of potential youth radicalisation, it should be the primary strand of countering against extremism and radicalisation. This is an even greater priority since earlier interventions are likely to have the strongest impact over the long term. Young people's need for inclusion and a sense of purpose needs to be mainstreamed across all areas of society. In countries experiencing a demographic shift towards a youthful population, there needs to be a focus upon youth issues in every sector, from agriculture to health. Since

disengagement from extremism is not dissimilar from leaving street-level criminal gangs, similar programmes may be valuable, in developing self-control and coping skills as well as increasing empathy. This might also include promulgating more inclusive and less judgemental interpretations of religious teachings, or countering racist ideology where appropriate. Studies of interventions suggest that raising levels of empowerment, along with self-esteem and empathy may be valuable – although this carries the proviso that increasing self-esteem can lead to narcissism, and empowerment can simply provide more social and capital for extremist ends (Feddes et al., 2015). This suggests that the development of empathy and compassion need to be core aspects of intervention activities.

Interventions into youth extremism comprise both prevention and redirection efforts. These can be targeted at all levels: prevention and de-radicalisation initiatives can be aimed at individuals considered at risk; for other young people, starting dialogues around radicalisation as a preventative measure.

At a community level, cross-cultural and interfaith interactions can be developed in order to diminish divisions between different groups. Community figures who embody the values of inclusion and dialogue can be important figures. Community organisations can be encouraged to work together to address local issues by engaging with young people, and ensuring that young people take leading roles in their work.

From a wider social level, besides addressing inequality and marginalisation and to develop social cohesion, campaigns can be developed to create counter-narratives, both online and in communities.

Young people as assets

Such a shift to a focus on youth needs to acknowledge that while young people may be particularly vulnerable to radicalisation into violent and extremist movements, the majority of young people do not express any interest in doing so, and many are active participants in pro-social struggles for human rights, environmentalism, and for minorities.

It is important not to position young people as a social problem which is likely to exacerbate feelings of alienation and powerlessness. Young people can also have an important capacity to counter extremism in their own communities and groups, and are invaluable partners in any attempts to address violent extremism. As Sarah Sewall, serving as US Under-Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, said

Young people can have an important capacity to counter extremism in their own communities and groups, and are invaluable partners in any attempts to address violent extremism.

It is time to stop thinking of youth as a problem to be solved, and start thinking of youth as the problem solvers

It is vital to engage with young people to create a compelling counter-narrative which will engage with young people: and to acknowledge that they are not merely seen as a social problem on the basis of the acts of a small radicalised minority. Individuals who have resisted or rejected extremist beliefs can change the perceptions of extremists, as well as challenging the idea that young people are a source of threat.

Approaches to countering violent extremism which are developed from the bottom-up are considered to be more effective than top-down approaches, and that it is impossible to engage with young people without their collaboration. Williams (2016) notes several promising youth-led programmes which are challenging both radicalisation and the social problems in which it develops in the Middle East and North Africa. These programmes can include peer-to-peer mentoring and the inclusion of young people in policy making.

Short-term, security-led solutions are unlikely to have a sustainable impact upon youth radicalisation, although they may be valuable in preventing potential attacks. For long-term benefits, there is a need to look at more foundational social changes. Young people's participation in counter-radicalisation should be included within a peace-building and development agenda in order to serve the best interests of young people.

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Creating change

Firstly, there is a need to promote good governance, accountability, and rule of law so that young people can have faith in their governments and institutions. This includes the development of strong a strong civic society that can generate positive changes on the ground. This effort needs to be both national and international in scale, and to be based in the principles of human rights and peacebuilding.

The state cannot act upon youth extremism without developing an infrastructure to connect them with local communities – particularly those with social cleavages around faith, politics, race and other identity groups. This does not mean instituting social control, but by creating two-way interactions which will support communities and identify and address social problems. It is very important not to create stigmatising narratives around certain groups, nor to allow them to circulate on the media, for the risk of creating co-radicalisation spirals.

More broadly, it must be recognised that counter-radicalisation measures require a response from society as a whole. Rampant youth unemployment and underemployment needs to be addressed through training and job creation. Feelings of exclusion need to be channelled into the democratic system, creating pathways for young people to express their agency without joining radical movements. Marginalised

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young people may need particular attention. There is a need to identify issues arising in the transitional periods in the lives of young people, and the development of support systems to step in for those who are experiencing difficulties, through the provision of social and psychological support.

Migration and radicalisation have become interlinked in the popular imagination, with young migrant males and the children of migrants being seen as a particular threat. This is an area that needs more accurate data and efforts towards a more restrained discussion, since stigmatising groups is unlikely to have positive impacts on societies experiencing migration. Often, connections between migration and radicalisation are framed as if the impacts upon Europe were the most significant: however, most of the world's migrants are concentrated in the global South, which causes a strain on resources in countries which are already struggling.

Dislocation and instability during adolescence and young adulthood is likely to increase susceptibility to radical worldviews and should be minimised where possible.

Building resilience

Interventions to increase resilience against extremist messaging are essential. This includes making sure that young people remain socially engaged with mainstream society, through school, work and community activities. Social networks such as these provide a vital sense of belonging and inclusion, as well as a sense of purpose. Extremist groups leverage loneliness and disengagement, as well as providing a heroic narrative of struggling against an enemy. Young people need coping skills to deal with conflict in productive ways. These skills include emotional self-regulation, positive communication, prosocial relationships, and empathy (Bornstein et al., 2010). Other sources of resilience are a strong sense of cultural identity and heritage, developing social capital and challenging the acceptability of violence (Grossman et al., 2017).

Extremist groups leverage loneliness and disengagement, as well as providing a heroic narrative of struggling against an enemy.

Given that both individual and environmental factors are difficult to influence, the role of third parties may be crucial in diverting vulnerable youth from negative influences. This includes state institutions, NGOs, and recreational activities. Effective counter-extremism interventions are challenging to design and implement, but can be build on insights drawn from young people themselves. While studying radicalised young people is important, it may also be valuable to assess the sources of resilience for young people who do not go down an extremist pathway. In specific

contexts, it should be established, how young people are marginalised, what forces are there to support them, who has influence over young people, what communities do young people engage with, what their experiences of engagements with the state are, and what future they envisage for themselves.

Oruc and Obradovic (2020) state that resilience can be built through 'civil society and political engagement, but also involvement in extracurricular activities and voluntary work. These not only fill the need for sociality and gaining a sense of purpose, but can also represent more productive and pro-social ways of dealing with a sense of grievance and injustice than through violence. In societies organised around the interests of older people there is a 'participatory deficit' which imperils the ability to form collective opinions through a discursive process. This participation is fundamental to generating tolerance and the acceptance of diversity.

Schools may be the last bastions against political polarisation and sites for the development of cognitive and emotional skills which can build resilience from an early age. They can also fulfill a secondary prevention role in detecting psycho-social issues in young people and flagging interventions where necessary. Education may represent our single best strategy for reducing the potential for youth radicalisation. UNESCO (Alava et al., 2017) particularly stress the importance of young people learning media literacy skills, so that they are able to evaluate

information they come across online while other researchers have highlighted the role of developing cognitive skills (Bouko et al., 2020).

Given the demographics of the regions most afflicted by extremism, the high concentration of young people who are creating and joining extremist groups, and the longer 'careers' of younger extremists, counter-radicalisation measures targetting young people may be particularly valuable. It is crucial to develop a multifaceted, multi-agency response to youth radicalisation that engages directly with young people, develops resilience, and creates routes out of extremism. It is also important that politics address young people's situations, particularly in the global South, and creates positive routes for young people to contribute to their societies peacefully and productively.

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