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How the Police Can Build Trust To Combat Extremism

By Omer Ali Saifudeen and Hamad Khatir

SYNOPSIS

To prevent and counter violent extremism in online spaces, a global team of experts working with the Secure Communities Forum has developed a National Response Model (NRM) for Countering Extremism Online. This paper outlines steps from the NRM that law enforcement officers and agencies – collectively referred to in this paper as the police – can take to build trust with youth and parents to combat extremism.

COMMENTARY

Even before the age of the Internet, youth were susceptible to radicalisation by malevolent actors. This susceptibility is due to the need of young people to feel accepted, the outrage they feel over injustices and their frustration not being able to do anything about it, their lived experiences which make them feel like a victim and their perception that a person or group is responsible for it, and extrinsic structural conditions that limit their opportunities and socio-economic mobility. Certain narratives promote such thinking and feelings. However, individuals have some level of agency over how they decide what to accept from a barrage of competing narratives. In being able to discern for themselves, youth face certain conditions that make them especially vulnerable to radicalisation.

Young, developing brains grapple with different social environments and seek to develop a sense of identity. They also struggle with feelings of alienation. Each of these aspects of youth psychology presents opportunities for extremist organisations to radicalise them by claiming to provide them with community, identity, and a sense of belonging. These organisations follow up by providing answers that vilify a target group and promote violence as a tangible solution to complex and nuanced issues.

There are also aspects of youth emotional development that further increase their vulnerability to radicalisation. The desire of youth to be connected with others and to receive positive attention can be manipulated by recruiters who use them to disseminate extremist messages and conspiracy theories. This is especially prevalent in social media and gaming environments online.

The problem of youth radicalisation is worsened when communities and the police do not trust each other. This lack of trust is often associated with [increases](#) in violent crime among youth. [Research](#) has also found that youth attitudes toward the police are affected by parental attitudes. Hence, increasing trust between parents and the community on the one hand, and the police on the other, can have positive effects.

Counter-radicalisation efforts should begin by identifying trusted partners in the community and families. The role of parents, although intuitive, cannot be overstated. By working with them among other stakeholders, the police can help to prevent online radicalisation and violent extremism before they take root.

Establishing Contact and Building Trust

There are many ways the police can engage with youth and parents to build trust. The parents of youth offenders and those at risk [seek relationships with police officers](#) whom they regard as crucial support systems for managing and resolving their child's behaviour.

Countries such as the United Arab Emirates have successfully developed positive relationships between the police and youth through initiatives such as the Dubai Police's Esports Tournament. In [Valencia](#), Spain, police officers visit schools and host an online educational game. In the [US](#), a small-town police department has officers to mentor youth in sports such as boxing.

Such programmes have enabled young people to build personal relationships with police officers in informal settings thereby increasing institutional trust. Contrary to popular belief, youth are not rebellious against authority figures per se but often want their guidance and support.

As for the parents of youth at risk of being radicalised, they will turn to anyone whom they think can turn their child around. The police can play a significant role by being the people whom these parents feel safe and confident turning to. The methods they can use [to dialogue with parents](#) include participation in community events and hosting educational programmes targeted at parents.

The most profound influence can result from simple acts that remove the psychological barrier between the police and delinquent youth. For example, spending some time during duty hours being approachable, or as someone that people in the community can speak with, will be helpful.

Although youth are often the target of online radicalisation efforts, there are some among them who can play a role in preventing and countering violent extremism. Young social workers, for example, are uniquely able to detect extremist tendencies among their peers and to anticipate impending violence. They should be encouraged

to report extremist sympathies before harm is done or to spread the right messages to their peers. Efforts should be made to find the right intermediaries within youth communities.

There is no hard and fast rule for the police to engage with youth and parents. The underlying principle is to assure youth and parents that law enforcement personnel are also part of the community they are helping to keep safe. Effective policing is ultimately based on the level of trust that the police can generate with parents and the community. As Sir Robert Peel, founder of the London Metropolitan Police in 1829 who laid down the principles of modern policing, said, “The police are the public, and the public are the police”.

Providing Advice on Controls and Platforms

Technology companies have developed tools for a variety of online environments, including gaming, social media and search engines, that can reduce exposure to violent and radicalising content. The police should advise parents about the parental controls available to them on popular youth platforms such as Minecraft, Roblox, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Some platforms have more appeal to violent extremists. Platforms that have self-deleting features or allow anonymous engagement tend to have higher instances of radicalising propaganda. The police and regulation authorities should let parents know the platforms their children may engage with and the controls available to them.

Such sharing increases police-parent trust and boosts youth resilience to online extremism. Despite this, there will be times when exposure to such content is inevitable, including those that straddle the border of hate speeches or subtly vilify communities and people. This is where “[pre-bunking](#)” comes in. Put simply pre-bunking is “to [preemptively debunk a line of disinformation](#) by publishing an account of that disinformation along with a simultaneous refutation before the disinformation itself is actually disseminated by its author”. Pre-bunking is an anticipatory form of disinformation or rumour control.

Conclusion

The vulnerability of youth to radicalisation presents an opportunity for the police and regulation authorities to showcase their role in supporting vulnerable populations. There are many ways for them to positively engage with youth and parents to counter the extremists. It is crucial that once radicalisation has occurred, parents and law enforcement agencies must cooperate to draw up a deradicalisation programme.

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