

Youth and the Role of Schools in Preventing Violent Extremism

This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.

Source articles

1. Matthew J. Mayer, John Horgan, Todd I. Herrenkohl, and David Osher, "Violent Extremism in the US: Causes and Consequences for Youth, Families, Schools and Communities," *Journal of School Psychology* 106 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2024.101345>.
2. John Horgan, Carrie Lorig, Randy Borum, Claire S. Allely, and Todd I. Herrenkohl, "Understanding and Preventing Violent Extremism in School Settings," *Journal of School Psychology* 106 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2024.101346>.

Key Takeaways

- Violent extremism among youth can emerge in many ways, so schools need nuanced, case by case approaches rather than fixed ideas of what a "high risk" student looks like.
- The school setting itself can either enable extremist recruitment or interrupt it, meaning that everyday school practices, relationships, and routines are key focus areas for early prevention work.
- When students are exposed to extremist violence or recruitment, ripple effects can show up in their emotional well-being, classroom functioning, and family life. Supporting students' mental health and building positive school climates can reduce both the risk and ramifications of extremist recruitment and violence.
- For prevention efforts to be comprehensive and evidence based, protective factors must be built at the community level, and school mental health providers need adequate resources to conduct effective threat assessments and to connect students with supports.

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Why did the researchers conduct these studies?

These studies examined the effects of violent extremism on schools, young people, and families.

The first study examined the rise of violent extremism in the United States and how it affects youth, families, and school communities. Prior research has not focused on the specific effects of extremist violence on children and schools, or it has examined extremist violence in combination with other forms of school violence, including bullying and gang-related incidents. By isolating violent extremism, this study sought to offer a clearer picture of its causes, risk factors, and consequences for young people and the communities in which they live and learn.

The second study focused on violent extremism in schools worldwide. The authors examined how schools are affected by extremist violence, both as targets and as places where young people can be recruited. The authors noted that schools often lack clear guidance on how to identify and manage these risks. This research is important for people working in prevention and threat assessment because it identified promising practices, practical challenges, and the need for better tools and training.

Both studies highlighted that schools are points of exposure where young people can be recruited to engage in violent extremism; however, schools are also crucial locations for prevention efforts.



Methodology

- The first article reviewed research, reports, and case studies about US violent extremism and schools. The authors looked at who is affected, how young people become involved, and what factors influence risk. They also examined the mental health and academic outcomes for students and families, identifying patterns and extracting practical lessons.
- The second article also reviewed research and examples, focusing on practical strategies for preventing violent extremism in schools. The authors looked at how schools use threat assessment tools to identify students at risk for extremist violence, and they explored the role of school psychologists and other staff in prevention.

Findings

- **No single profile for risk.** There is no “typical” student involved in violent extremism—youth come from a wide range of backgrounds, and no reliable demographic or psychological profile predicts involvement. Further, most young people who express extreme or radical beliefs do not commit violence, so prevention efforts should avoid unnecessary labeling or exclusion.
- **Schools are both targets and recruitment grounds.** Schools may be attacked by extremist networks or individuals, but they are more often places where students are exposed to extremist ideas or recruitment efforts.
- **Students can experience serious negative mental health and academic ramifications.** Students affected by extremist violence or recruitment can experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, trouble concentrating, and drops in academic performance. These effects can last a long time and also affect families and the wider school community.

- **Structured assessment tools are valuable.** Evidence-based risk and threat assessment tools—especially when applied by trained, multidisciplinary teams—can help schools more accurately identify which students need support and what kind of help is appropriate.
- **School psychologists play multiple key prevention roles.** When trained appropriately and given adequate resources, school psychologists can help lead prevention efforts, apply assessment tools, and work with other staff and families to address warning signs early and connect students with needed supports.
- **Racism, anti-immigrant prejudice, and beliefs in group dominance can contribute to violent extremism.** Schools can help students examine extremist messages, build positive identities and resilience, and create protective communities grounded in respect, belonging, connection, and peaceful dialogue.
- **Prevention is a multilayered, community-wide effort.** Prevention efforts should focus on building a positive school and community climate, supporting student mental health, promoting inclusion, and providing early help to students displaying risk factors—rather than relying on only security measures.

How can practitioners working in early-stage intervention and threat assessment use these findings?

- Behavioral threat assessment and management teams should rely on structured, evidence-based approaches for assessment, such as the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines or the National Threat Assessment Center model, which have been shown to accurately identify serious threats.
- Prevention efforts should start with building resilience, inclusion, and mechanisms for providing early support to students in need.
- All school audiences—educators, staff, clinicians, and peers—should receive training on how to recognize warning signs and respond when a student is being targeted by extremist networks or individuals.
- School psychologists in particular should be well trained and sufficiently resourced to implement threat assessments and interventions.
- School-based practitioners should proactively communicate with students and families about the risk of extremist recruitment and violence, as well as available resources and threat-mitigation procedures.

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