

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Foreign and Familiar: Recruitment Pathways of Young People Engaged With Extremism in Australia

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Abstract: It has been established by leaders of the Australian national security community, such as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Federal Police, that young people are being increasingly recruited into extremism. To date, few Australian studies have examined this issue using primary source data. This article seeks to understand the conditions which may make vulnerable young Australians more susceptible to recruitment, recruitment pathways, and forms of recruitment. To address this, primary sources were consulted, and frontline countering violent extremism (CVE) practitioners were interviewed. It was found that there is no typical pathway for young Australians to be recruited to extremism and that recruitment can be both foreign (informed by transnational networks and organisations) and/or familiar (within the immediate domestic environment of the young person). We identified the continued significance of online vectors, but further established the ongoing relevance and power of offline engagement for the recruitment of young people. Finally, we suggest that multiple intersecting vulnerabilities render young people more susceptible to recruitment, with data that suggests they may be naïve to their being recruited in the first place.

Keywords: Extremism, recruitment, Australia, networks, vulnerability

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Introduction

The recruitment of young people to extremist and terrorist organisations has been a feature of the Australian national security discourse for some time. This was energised again recently during the 2024 Inquiry into Right Wing Extremist Movements in Australia, which fielded submissions from the Department of Home Affairs and the Australian Federal Police highlighting their concern about the engagement of young Australians in violent extremism.¹ This follows a 2023 parliamentary inquiry, where the Department of Home Affairs expressed concerns about the decreasing age of recruitment, with young people being targeted to further the dissemination of extremist propaganda and inciting others to violence.² While there is considerable scholarship on recruitment trajectories to violent extremism internationally and demonstrable awareness of the challenge in the counter-terrorism community of practice, it nevertheless represents a lacuna in the academic field of knowledge in the Australian context.

This article examines the recruitment of young Australians into extremism. To do this, it draws on primary source data, compiled through interviews with frontline countering violent extremism (CVE) practitioners and the analysis of case file data of young people who have participated in the associated CVE program. There were three primary research questions. First, what conditions may render vulnerable young people susceptible to recruitment by extremists? Second, how were young people being recruited into extremism? And third, who was recruiting young people into extremism? These questions, it was theorised, would help build a better knowledge foundation for understanding the susceptibility of young people to engage in extremism and potentially illuminate under-recognised factors. In doing so, it provides an evidence-based analysis of the recruitment of young Australians to violent extremism, debunking common stereotypes across fields of practice and scholarship.

It was found that there is no typical pathway for young Australians to be recruited to extremism and that recruitment can be both foreign (informed by transnational networks and organisations) and familiar (within the immediate domestic environment of the young person). In suggesting this, we highlight the significance of domestic organisations, and also the part played by family and peer networks. We also identified the continued significance of online vectors, but further established the ongoing relevance and power of offline engagement for the recruitment of young people. We challenge the discourse in Australia which focuses on the online environment without concomitant consideration of offline engagement. Finally, we identify that multiple intersecting vulnerabilities render young people more susceptible to recruitment, with data that suggests some are naïve to their being recruited in the first place. To demonstrate this, an overview of the literature will first be provided, followed by the methodology and research questions, findings, and then a discussion which orientates the outcomes in the Australian national security discourse.

Extremist Recruitment of Young People to Violent Extremism

The recruitment of young people has been a topic for Australian researchers for nearly a decade. The driver behind the research was established recently by Barracosa and March, who highlighted that 25 percent of counter-terrorism convictions were of young people—and among them, ten percent between 2014 and 2018 involved jihadism.³ The problem is, of course, hardly new. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was thought to have used “forced recruitment” of young people to swell its ranks, provoking anti-PKK demonstrations in 2015.⁴

There is a significant body of scholarship that seeks to explain the recruitment of young people in extremism, although it has been suggested that this body of scholarship lacks evidential rigour, with only fifteen of 16,582 studies containing primary source data.⁵

Limited evidence-based studies exist on the recruitment of Australians to extremist or terrorist organisations. Harris-Hogan and Barrelle undertook a longitudinal study of violent Salafi-Jihadist (VSJ) milieus, analysing seventeen years of data on Australian VSJ, including demographic characteristics and illicit activities.⁶ They suggested that during the third 'wave' of jihadists post-2017, the demographic shifted, with the average age decreasing. A third of jihadists (33 percent) were young people and a majority had planned or committed terrorist act offences. They explain recruitment susceptibility through social identity factors, biological and neurological development, and social networks (including relatives and peers). The social network element is key, given that a compelling proportion (86 percent) of young extremists had family members, fellow students, or peer connections with VSJ milieus.

We now turn to the greater body of international literature, which typically exhibits composite, macro-level, and micro-level explanations for recruitment. While some of these relate to distinct sociopolitical contexts, they provide insight into conceptions of youth recruitment beyond a Western lens. In some contexts, this relates to child soldiers in armed groups, which provides a different lens on the engagement of young people in political violence. As will be detailed below, this can be impacted by structural conditions such as education or socioeconomic context. While these distinctions are important, they also offer greater insight into both the normality of the engagement of young people in political violence and their exploitation by adults with ambitions beyond their welfare. It further foregrounds the essentiality of youth around the world being socialised, recruited, or even, in some cases, forced into adult undertakings that they may not entirely understand.

Composite Explanations

Composite explanations for youth recruitment arose primarily in association with researching VSJ milieus. Asal et al. centralised the role of the family in a child deciding to join jihad, following other studies that suggested that family context did not matter.⁷ Families are noted as an avenue for recruitment into militancy in the Palestinian context as well.⁸ Asal found that in the Pakistani context, lower socioeconomic families or particularly religious families were more likely to consent to a child participating in VSJ in the hope or promise of financial reward, while wealthier families were less likely to consent. Unemployment and education levels did not affect parental consent.

One of the leading studies is by Horgan et al., who examined the recruitment of children into the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁹ They note that ISIS recruited children from internally displaced populations, including foreign fighter families; from local impoverished communities (to wit: there was a financial incentive for parents); incentivised through public contests; from orphanages; by accepting child volunteers/runaways; and by abduction and/or slavery. Children were used as fighters, suicide bombers, spies, and recruiters themselves, and were also indoctrinated with Salafi jihadist ideology while witnessing punishments such as beheadings, crucifixions, and stonings. Horgan et al. identified a multifaceted socialisation process: 1) seduction through peripheral exposure; 2) schooling through direct exposure to material and personnel; 3) selection through focused attention, screening and grooming for roles; 4) subjugation through physical and psychological brutalisation; 5) specialisation through training; and 6) stationing, with deployment to assigned roles. They noted that age, maturity, development, socioeconomic, and caregiver aspects may be considerations in recruitment but concluded that more data is needed.

Babatunde contended that Boko Haram's recruitment of youth has made it "the most ferocious armed gang".¹⁰ The preaching of religious ideology and propaganda was essential to recruitment, in addition to filling power vacuums led by poor governance through charity work and financial reward. When the pull of piety declined, the recruitment strategy switched to promising welfare. Other drivers included peer and family relationships, or alternative futures. For example, girls were able to avoid early marriage by joining Boko Haram and gaining protection and sometimes religious instruction. Similarly, a report by Darden suggests that youth are vulnerable to terrorist recruitment due to proximity to a terrorist group, economic vulnerability, marginalisation (social or political), social networks, and propaganda.¹¹ The individual's context and local sociopolitical and economic contexts are also factors in recruitment. Once recruited, it is suggested that most male youth assume combat roles while female youth are more often employed in support or recruitment roles. They noted that youth can be motivated by a search for identity, ideological appeal, perceptions of exclusion or grievance, economic reward, prospect of fame, or personnel connections.

Pethő-Kiss and Gunaratna also demonstrate the multifaceted aspects of recruitment in extreme right-wing contexts.¹² They note that recruitment has been seen to be gradual and dynamic, occurring in numerous settings and forms, driven by family or social networks, and informed by propaganda. They suggest that recruitment, including that targeting youth, is informed by low barriers for entry into movements, personal interactions online (such as via video games, alternate tech sites, and social media), and personal interactions offline (such as via leafletting, meeting at schools or on school buses or campuses, and through charities) are frequently exploited mechanisms for recruitment.

Macro-level Explanations

Macro-level explanations seek to explain youth recruitment via bigger societal forces and systems, such as economic deprivation. Blazak conducted early research into extreme right-wing (XRW) youth recruitment by examining skinheads in North America.¹³ Using macro-level anomie to identify micro-level behaviour, Blazak suggests that anomie is a factor motivating adolescent recruitment to skinhead gangs, identifiable by "non-utilitarianism, maliciousness, and negativism".¹⁴ The disconnects between aspiration, opportunity, and individual material needs were notable factors, but ultimately Blazak argues that the young skinheads, who typically identify as white and heterosexual, constructed and reacted to negative stimuli in form of the threat, supposedly represented by antiracism, LGBTIQ+ rights, feminism, multiculturalism, and other forms of progressivism. The threats to the cultural anomie are therefore threats to ethnic or racial status, to gender status, to heterosexual status, and to economic status. This was particularly insightful for the Australian context.

Mieriņa and Koroļeva examined the factors behind the involvement of young people in the XRW in fourteen European countries.¹⁵ They suggested that young people in post-socialist countries tend to hold more negative predispositions (such as xenophobia and ethnonationalism), which align with XRW concepts despite varying or low immigration rates in the countries examined. Moreover, resource stress, status deprivation, and unemployment were suggested to be key factors, inferring that XRW ideology was more appealing to insecure groups. Adelaja and George explore this concept in the Sub-Saharan Africa context, where even employed youth are in poverty (70 percent).¹⁶ This theoretically increases susceptibility, due to the aggravation of grievances associated with contextual factors, such as institutional corruption. Bad governance has also been suggested to predispose Nigerian youths to recruitment,¹⁷ as has disadvantage (often related to poverty and low socioeconomic status), the tactical use of drugs, fake romances, the promise of financial reward, and (in some cases) direct kidnapping/human trafficking.¹⁸

Micro- or Identity-based Explanations

Micro-level explanations typically relate to personal or individual contexts, particularly with reference to identity and the quest for significance. In the Maldives, Speckhard et al. suggest that youth are vulnerable due to three issues: lack of education and employment opportunities, lack of informed religious instruction, and substance abuse.¹⁹ When coupled with feelings of hopelessness, and driven by a quest for significance, young people can be more susceptible to the promises of jihadists for opportunity and redemption. Similarly, Doosje et al. draw on Dutch youth to provide a framework for determinants in susceptibility for engaging with XRW.²⁰ They suggest that resonance with Dutch identity, perceived injustice and threat, and relative deprivation are important background determinants. An Italian study of XRW youth by Dechezelles suggests cultural framing influences involvement alongside social, familial, and biographical experiences.²¹ Bizina and Gray also suggested that in their search for identity, purpose and acceptance, young people may turn to extremism.²² Lynch reviewed constructions of Muslim youth in the UK and found it tangled problematically in notions of identity crisis, alienation, and intergenerational conflict, where British Muslim youths were being constantly challenged to prove their trustworthiness and loyalty to British culture.²³

Turner-Graham examined XRW expressions on microblogs such as Tumblr to understand engagement online.²⁴ They suggest that microblogs become places of virtual community and identity, where participants frame themselves as rebellious outsiders. In these online communities, the 1940s are celebrated as a lost golden age, promoting the blue-eyed, blonde-haired ideals of the fascist body cult. Turner-Graham suggests this is the “perfect fodder for the rebellious teen”.²⁵ Miller-Idriss also shifts away from formal engagement to cultural participation in the XRW, examining other visual artefacts such as meme culture, iconography, lyrics, and aesthetics.²⁶ Miller-Idriss challenges scholarship that explains engagement via economic uncertainty, instead suggesting that cultural threats are a stronger predictor, tying in with the concomitant emotional impulses to belong and identify with a group and to reject and rebel against mainstream (adult) society. Such identity-based explanations highlight the often-overlooked engagement elements such as quests for meaning or significance, relationship certainty, or reframing deficits as systemic unfairness.

Suyanto et al. examined exposure to radical ideologies in Indonesian universities and found that recruitment trajectories were dynamic.²⁷ Some were searching for a purer religious model, others joined because of peers, disillusionment with their academic performance, and/or became engaged unintentionally. The scholarship on youth recruitment into XRW milieus is hardly comprehensive, but the diverse disciplinary approaches highlight some prominent explanations. These include the desire for belonging, which can be associated with status, prestige, privilege, or protection; the quest for a secure identity, which can be associated with collective identities, aesthetic expressions, and cultural styles; and rebellion avenues, where negative dispositions, hostilities, grievances, and oppositional sentiment can be expressed. There is no single explanation of how or why young people are susceptible to recruitment. More, perhaps, can be learned of youth vulnerability to recruitment by pivoting to vulnerability literature.

Youth Vulnerability

The vulnerability of young people requires further and separate explanation, given the demographics intrinsic to the study cohort. Simi and Futrell interviewed 128 current and former white supremacists from five different organisations to understand engagement better.²⁸ They found that socialisation at home significantly influenced individuals' learning of the movement's norms, values, and ideals. Koehler conducted a theoretical assessment of violent

extremism in association with toxic stress and substance abuse issues among adolescents.²⁹ While acknowledging that much research on mental health and terrorism focuses on adults, Koehler considered the recruitment of children and adolescents but “does not focus on mental health issues or child abuse as a potential precursor”.³⁰ He suggests that engagement in extremism poses risks to physical and mental well-being, with extremists exploiting traumatic and therapeutic factors to encourage group commitment and embedment in the milieu.

Woodbury-Smith et al, in a paper on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and extremism, note that vulnerability to extremism may be influenced by how individuals with ASD are treated.³¹ They emphasise that “the appeal of belonging... may be stronger in people who do not experience a sense of community and belonging in other contexts”.³² They also highlight that other contributing factors, such as poor empathy, a history of trauma, childhood sexual and physical abuse, and neglect remain significant gaps in research. However, Druitt et al. suggest that existing scholarship cannot definitively conclude that individuals with ASD are more vulnerable to engagement with extremism than others.³³ This was significant for this project, given the early indications of ASD in the dataset.

Turning to other vulnerabilities, Dryden discussed the role of child protection in countering youth recruitment within the UK’s PREVENT strategy.³⁴ He highlighted factors such as the need for belonging and unmet needs, political grievances, and theology and religion. Dryden suggested that youth are still often perceived as security risks rather than as victims. He noted that children in out-of-home care are particularly vulnerable due to experiencing trauma and a range of social, psychological, and behavioural challenges. Windisch et al. measured the scope and nature of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) through a questionnaire and interviews with 91 North American white supremacists.³⁵ They found that 63 percent of these individuals had experienced four or more adverse experiences before the age of eight, a rate higher than both a high-risk comparison sample (55 percent) and the general US population (16 percent). The interviews revealed maladaptive coping strategies that increased susceptibility to extremism. While acknowledging that a single traumatic event might lead to engagement in extremism, they found that such engagement was more likely the result of multiple cumulative ACEs. This research complements linked work by Logan et al., who compared ACE exposures before age eighteen between XRW and extreme left-wing (XLW) cohorts.³⁶ They noted a distinct difference, with 70 percent of the XRW cohort having been exposed to ACEs, compared to 50 percent of the XLW cohort. This was relevant to this paper’s data, given the early indications of ACEs. With this complexity in mind, we turn to the recruitment of young people within the scope of our project.

Methodology

This project aims to understand how and why young people may be recruited into extremism drawing on available evidence from New South Wales, Australia. The project had three phases. First, a literature review was undertaken which examined security studies and criminal justice literature to better understand the recruitment of young people and the vulnerability associated with young people – especially as identified in criminal justice contexts. Ethics approval was applied for and received, enabling the second phase of the project. In this phase, the research team conducted interviews with members ($n=6$) of the Engagement Support Unit (ESU) within the Department of Communities and Justice, New South Wales government, Australia. The interviews were semi-structured and thematic, and ranged from forty to seventy minutes in length. The interviewees were assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Following this, case files ($n=17$) related to young people engaged in extremism were reviewed, and de-identified at the time of access. It was noted in the ethics approval that some sensitive data, such as political beliefs or criminal history, would be accessed as part of the research. The case files were also referred to by pseudonyms. The data selection and collection were informed by two perspectives. The first was the criminal justice perspective, which sought to understand three overlapping contexts of the young person's life: personal, social, and environmental. The second was a CVE perspective that sought to understand the engagement of young people through a synthesis of factors centralised in *The Radical's Journey* by Kruglanski et al., which identifies the primacy of needs, narratives, and networks in extremist engagement contexts.³⁷ This was selected as Kruglanski et al.'s N Trilogy theory has been applied to both extreme right-wing and jihadist actors, making it a viable fit for the study based on the ideological division of the cohort. Because of this two-pronged data collection approach, there were overlaps. For example, the criminal justice collections on personal context (i.e. vulnerabilities) overlapped with the CVE collections on needs. We found this enriched the dataset with greater insight, rather than unbalancing the project.

The files and the interview transcripts were subject to basic quantitative and in-depth qualitative methods. Quantitatively, descriptive statistics were derived from the raw data that provide an overview of key demographic characteristics and factors of clients. Because of the limitations inherent with a small dataset, gender was omitted. Qualitatively, the data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis, generating themes from the data through which to organise and better understand it. These reoccurring patterns and themes were considered both in isolation of – and in conjunction with – the interview transcripts, to better understand the responses and answer the research questions. The research questions and associated data collection points are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Questions and Data Collection Summary

Question	Detail	Data context	Data collection point
Research question #1	<i>What conditions may render young people susceptible to recruitment?</i>	Criminal justice considerations on the personal, social, and environmental contexts of young people; CVE considerations on needs.	• Identifiable vulnerabilities • Ideological familiarity • Prior offenses • Education • Relationship security • Stressors
Research question #2	<i>How were young people being recruited into extremism?</i>	CVE considerations on needs being met by recruitment (i.e. belonging); and offline and online networks.	• Deliberative recruitment • Nondeliberative recruitment • Online vectors • Offline vectors
Research question #3	<i>Who was recruiting young people into extremism?</i>	CVE considerations on needs (via organisations) networks via identifiable engagement	• Transnational networks • Domestic networks • Organisational involvement • Other recruiters

Before turning to the findings, it is necessary to establish the definitions of key concepts in this paper. For the purpose of this study, recruitment was defined as the process through which an individual becomes part of an extremist organisation – including coercive recruitment, child

recruitment, and open, non-coercive forms, as inspired by Alakoc et al.³⁸ This is distinct from radicalisation, which is defined as the process through which an individual comes to accept or adopt the extremist beliefs, attitudes and social mores associated with a political, religious or ideological system and condone violence in pursuit of them.³⁹ Vulnerability is defined as the factors that make an individual more susceptible to harmful or unlawful activity, often related to personal, environmental or social factors. As Druitt et al. suggest, “vulnerability describes an individual’s openness or susceptibility for engagement” in extremism.⁴⁰ Susceptibility, as a separate concept, refers to the likelihood of a vulnerable person being influenced or drawn into harmful or unlawful behaviour. Vulnerable people, particularly those with trauma histories, may have poor attachments.⁴¹ This may leave them more susceptible to joining networks that may be harmful, in order to find belonging and security.

Findings

To understand the engagement of young people, it is essential to establish the demographic details. Out of the seventeen client cases reviewed, sixteen were male and one was female, making a gendered analysis unfeasible. The age range at the time of engagement with the programme was 13–27 years, with a median age of nineteen and a mean age of twenty. The inclusion of the older clients was due to their age at time of involvement, rather than current age. Thirty-five percent of the individuals were from rural areas, and almost 60 percent were from the western suburbs of Sydney. Seven individuals identified as belonging to an ethnic minority, though some files lacked explicit information on cultural or ethnic heritage. All cases fell into two threat categories: Salafi jihadism (specifically) or Islamist extremism (more generally), and right-wing extremism (including white supremacy, neo-Nazism, fascism, and white nationalism). There were no identified anti-government individuals. Breaking it down further, 47 percent of cases were linked to violent Salafi jihadism, while 53 percent were linked to right-wing extremism. This breakdown enables meaningful cross-comparison between VSJ and XRW cohorts. We now return to our research questions.

Research Question #1: What conditions may render vulnerable young people susceptible to recruitment?

Young people have innate vulnerabilities which may render them more vulnerable to recruitment. This includes a measure of ideological familiarity, prior offences, educational outlook, relationship security, and stressors, which influence their overall susceptibility.

Innate Vulnerabilities

The study examined the vulnerabilities of young people concerning mental health, neurodiversity, adverse childhood experiences, and other factors, which will be detailed in another work (Authors, forthcoming). This research established that young Australians were susceptible to extremism due to multiple intersecting vulnerabilities. Of the cases reviewed, 70 percent indicated the presence of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These were formally diagnosed. Several files indicated the presence or suspicion of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (some were diagnosed, some were awaiting diagnosis, and one was found to have a contrary diagnosis after formal examination). Nearly 60 percent of cases showed comorbidity of neurodiversity with behavioural disorders. Around 70 percent of individuals had experienced significant Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), with some cases involving multiple ACEs for a single individual. Over half had experienced some form of victimisation, such as bullying or social isolation, often in educational settings. Some had experienced out-of-home care or

had interactions with the criminal justice system. As one interviewee suggested, “They all have their vulnerabilities or susceptibilities.” These factors suggest inherent vulnerabilities that could render young people more susceptible to manipulation, grooming, or recruitment into extremist organisations (Authors, forthcoming).

Ideological Familiarity

Considering the ages and ideological categories, it was essential to assess the depth of their ideological knowledge. This was done by examining the data traces which suggested they might identify with an in-group, and attribute grievances to an ideological outgroup. Identification with an in-group indicates the bounded community they feel part of, and believe needs defending. The attribution of grievances identifies the outgroup community they blame for societal issues, thus justifying violence against them. This method has limitations, as ideological knowledge might not always be apparent from the data, and the amount of data can vary. Overall, 59 percent of cases showed that the individuals had familiarity with core ideological knowledge, though, in the remainder of cases, there was insufficient data to determine this.

Prior Offenses

One of the core considerations for legislating against terrorism in Western democracies is the threat or use of violence, encompassing preparatory, planning, and execution stages. Extremist ideologies, as noted in academic scholarship, typically endorse violence to achieve their goals. This endorsement of violence is often deemed necessary for classification as extreme. Therefore, detailing the nature of the offences and the individual’s history of violence is crucial to contextualise whether violence is a normal part of their approach to dispute resolution. In 76 percent of cases, individuals had prior offences ranging from juvenile misconduct like truancy to more severe crimes such as stalking, harassment, assault, grievous bodily harm, and potentially domestic violence (as indicated by an Apprehended Violence Order). The most serious offences included threats (including death threats), possession of weapons/firearms, aggravated break and enter, arson, possession of explosives, possession of child abuse materials, advocacy for terrorist acts, preparation for terrorist acts, and creating or collecting documents for terrorist acts.

Education

The educational achievements of extremists vary, particularly in hierarchical terrorist organisations, and their relevance is debated.⁴² Brockhoff et al., Korotayev et al., and Danzell et al. contend that lower education levels may be linked to terrorism.⁴³ The US dataset PIRUS supports this, indicating low educational achievement is common, with few radicalised persons holding advanced degrees.⁴⁴ In this project, the cases show that 82 percent were struggling academically. For young people, home stability can be crucial to academic progression. Nearly 65 percent of young people in this study had experienced instability, including family upheaval, domestic violence, severe illness, loss of the family home, links to organised crime, drug use in the family, child sex abuse, financial insecurity, and personal medical conditions.

Relationship Security

Relationship security (this is sometimes assessed as intimate relationships, such as in TRAP-18) is one way to consider the strength and security of attachments (poor attachment theory being noted as a maladaptive coping mechanism). For this study, relationship security was used to refer to secure attachments or social connections, whether with an intimate or non-intimate

romantic partner, or through friendships with peers. Relationship security may also be used in certain contexts as a mechanism to gain a greater understanding of the social engagement – or alternatively the isolation/alienation – of an individual, as well as providing insight into the young person's attachments. Only around 18 percent of cases reviewed indicated the presence of strong relationships, either with peers or romantic partners. Generally, the cohort did not exhibit strong or secure attachments.

Stressors

The final susceptibility consideration is stressors. Stressors can highlight a deficit in social support or environment, and reinforce feelings of isolation or grievance. Ideologies, moreover, can provide a simple explanation for the individual's environment and its deficits, allowing stressors to be attributed to a dehumanised outgroup or a malevolent actor (for example). Some 82 percent experienced stressors, ranging from changing schools to losing their homes, being sexually assaulted, mental health issues, bullying, family incarceration, experiences of family domestic violence (both as a witness and victim), financial insecurity, family bereavement, illness, bullying, drug abuse, and witnessing death.

Research Question #2: How were young people being recruited into extremism?

Following a review of exposure vectors, two recruitment avenues were identified: deliberative and nondeliberative. This occurred in online and offline environments.

Exposure Vectors

It is rarely possible to establish the point of first exposure to extremism, especially with the complex interplay of online and offline environments. Pauwels and Hardyns suggest exposure comes in many forms, and can be active or passive.⁴⁵ Across the cases, the main exposure vectors included direct relationships, such as family or friends, direct recruitment by organisations, online forums, or international travel. In a small amount of cases, it was not possible to identify a clear exposure vector due to data scarcity. Some 50 percent of the VSJ cases showed signs of exposure through a direct relationship, around 12 percent through travel, and the remainder unknown. Nearly 12 percent of XRW cases exposed through a direct relationship, 33 percent through organisational exposure, 11 percent on online forums, and the remainder unknown. The data was further suggestive of some young people aligning themselves with prominent organisations (such as Islamic State), without having ever been in direct contact.

Deliberative Recruitment

It was not possible from the available data to identify specific recruitment operations in a linear fashion. However, once accounting for the conditions which may foster vulnerability and susceptibility (as identified in RQ1), it was simply enough to note that the young people were vulnerable by their circumstances. Subsequent to this, it was possible to distinguish incidences of deliberative recruitment. As noted earlier, 33 percent of XRW cases showed signs of deliberate recruitment by an organisation. These organisations were primarily domestic, and related to white supremacy, white nationalism, and neo-Nazism. For the VSJ cohort, it was not possible to confirm if Islamic State supporters had been actively recruited by Islamic State. With rare exceptions, both online and offline environments influenced this form of recruitment.

Nondeliberative Recruitment (Socialisation)

The other recruitment dynamic observed was non-deliberative recruitment (or socialisation), also occurring in online or offline contexts. This is where the young people became socialised to or with extremist organisations without being deliberately or actively recruited. This can occur when young people are unconsciously seeking a sense of belonging, whether in an organisation, community, or family context, as noted by interviewees. The interviewees suggested this can happen within the family, in other (criminal) organisations, or in online forums. As Alex explained,⁴⁶

It does seem to be, 'I was playing this game in this chat group and they introduced me to this and there was this whole group of people and they seemed really cool and exciting and different, or I was bored and this was exciting or I saw this YouTube and that led to this YouTube which led to this YouTube'.

Engagement with others may have promoted a sense of community, belonging, and importance. As one interviewee suggested, "Online he felt like he had friends and was making a name for himself." In some cases, as identified by Morgan, this can occur when a young person becomes involved with a criminal organisation, which just so happens to have an ideology attached to it. There was a common denominator with the socialisation paradigm: naiveté. Interviewees reported that the young people did not realise that they were becoming socialised to an ideology or recognise they were being recruited deliberately. As suggested by Taylor, "I don't know if they know that they're being recruited until after it happens." Further:

...they always seem to be quite surprised that they've got into trouble. They didn't realise that talking to someone about killing Jews was illegal. And I think that they – there does seem to be this commonality that they didn't realise that they're actually going down that rabbit hole. Until they were well and truly down the rabbit hole.

This highlights the vulnerable nature of the cohort, who may not understand, be able to identify, or control the circumstances around their engagement in extremism.

Offline Engagement

Offline engagement remains a recruitment avenue. Recruiting drives can foster engagement opportunities, project the presence of the extremist group, promote organisational cohesion, and otherwise make its members feel part of something. For the VSJ cohort, around 62 percent demonstrated offline engagement in some form. This included family and friend networks (direct relationships), as well as meeting in person with extremists they had met online. Locations included mosques, bookstores, people overseas, or in prison. There was insufficient data for the remainder. For the XRW cohort, over 44 percent demonstrated offline engagement through direct relationships, at seemingly social events such as barbecues, organisation meetings, primary school and high school.

This offline engagement was clear in some families. Blake identified one case where the young person's "father has got his own grievances, that's for sure," while Morgan observed that some "families are quite anti-government." Alex also agreed with this, stating "there's definitely some clients where there's someone in the family that has shared the beliefs." Again, Taylor notes, some of their young people's exposure has been familial, where there was "definitely an element of permissiveness within the family unit". Quinn observed this to happen where it has occurred in respect to the grandmother or grandfather, brother, father or uncle. This can go beyond permissiveness or tolerance to direct encouragement, as explained by Rory:

And [young person] I was talking about ... they were using dad's social media platform to espouse right wing hate, and dad thought it was great and encouraged him. So he was pleasing dad.

Offline engagement, therefore, remains an important factor in recruitment contexts.

Online Engagement

The VSJ cohort was commonly synchronously engaged online, with close to 87 percent of the cohort demonstrating online engagement. A minority did not demonstrate online engagement, perhaps due to their higher level of offline engagement. For the XRW cohort, 77 percent demonstrated online engagement, while 22 percent did not demonstrate online engagement, again, perhaps due to their high level of offline engagement. Some of this online exposure is driven by curious peers, as Quinn noted that, “kids of a similar age saying, ‘Oh, have you seen this? Have you seen that? But this—you can find it here.’” In other cases, the exposure to materials is more calculated, as Taylor explains:

They're all being led online by other peoples who are unnamed. But definitely being fed information, fed pictures, being fed the violent gore videos, they're receiving these from external players.

In the interviews, the practitioners reported that recruitment can and does vary depending on the age of the young person, and how engaged they are online. In one instance, Blake commented that the young person was “being groomed quite well to probably perform some act for this guy to claim.” Quinn seconded this, stating “with this social media and internet use, there's obviously a lot of online grooming to engage young people.” Social media allows recruiters to test the responses of their targets, as Quinn elaborated:

That space is really unregulated and it's very easy for someone to then come in there and see who the person is that doesn't get picked for teams and doesn't get picked to play consistently in a group of the same people and sort of identify them as somewhat vulnerable or maybe there's a capacity there where they could be groomed online.

Even in cases where it may not be calculated grooming, recruiters could arguably “identify them as somewhat vulnerable or maybe there's a capacity there where they could be groomed online.” As noted by Rory, the young person:

...starts to get further and further, further down a rabbit hole. Someone's helping that. Someone is assisting them on their journey.

Research Question #3: Who was recruiting young people into extremism?

Young people are recruited into extremism via transnational and domestic networks, with domestic networks the most common. It was difficult to evidence active recruitment by transnational networks such as Islamic State due to data deficits, however, it was identifiable amongst domestic XRW organisations.

Transnational and Domestic Networks

In some cases, it was difficult to determine the actual contact with a transnational entity. For the VSJ cohort, a minority appeared to be purely engaged via transnational networks, through

international travel and, later, online transnational engagement. By contrast, a quarter had engagement with domestic networks, such as in correctional facilities, or through a local cell pledged to Islamic State. The identification of both transnational and domestic networks via friends and family accounted for a quarter of the cases. There was insufficient information to categorise the remainder (for example, one young person was suggested to have been in contact with an undercover officer who they believed was a representative of a terror organisation).

For the XRW cohort, it was not possible to categorise the network engagement of nearly 45 percent of the cohort based on the available data. By contrast to the VSJ cohort, however, there were indications of a higher rate of domestic entities at play, with nearly 34 percent of the individuals engaged with a named domestic network or group. A minority engaged purely online with a transnational entity (which was potentially unaware of the young person's interest), and just over 10 percent engaged with both a transnational network and domestic network. While hardly overwhelming by raw data breakdowns, this serves to highlight the endurance and ongoing relevance of domestic entities.

Organisational Involvement

With the VSJ cohort, the organisation with which the young people felt engaged, was overwhelmingly Islamic State. This is even though there were ideological contradictions in the data that suggested a less-than-perfect understanding of the Islamic State vision. Further, it was not possible from the data to verify whether any of the young people supporting Islamic State had direct contact with the terror network. For the XRW cohort, nearly 34 percent of the young people appeared engaged with (primarily domestic) organisations that could be catalogued within the white supremacy, white nationalist, fascist, and neo-Nazi milieu – the 'traditional' extreme right. For the remaining 67 percent, there was no organisation specified, but the beliefs still fitted within the traditional extreme right. It bears to reason that in some cases, the young person's recruitment was less about ideology, and more about community. As one interviewee suggested, "they've gone through that sort of cycle of latching onto something that gave them a sense of family, a sense of community."

Discussion

These findings paint an interesting picture of the recruitment of young people into extremism in Australia, and speak to three points of contestation: the role of the online environment in extremism, the power and reach of transnational terror networks (and what can be done), and the youth demographic itself.

Free-Form Engagement Environments

The focus on online extremism in the Australian context is well-established by national security stakeholders.⁴⁷ Headlines abounded in 2022 with tales of children as young as ten being radicalised on social media.⁴⁸ This was emphasised in the 2024 Parliamentary inquiry into Right Wing Extremist Movements in Australia, which contained a specific Term of Reference being "a.(v) the role of the online environment in promoting extremism," but no reference to offline environments.⁴⁹ Often, the importance of the offline environment is reduced in these discourses. It is suggested here that both online and offline environments influence the recruitment of young people into extremism, while acknowledging that, in some cases, it was difficult to verify the extent or nature of that engagement. The data is certainly suggestive of considerable online and offline engagement. It must be noted, however, that the internet plays a part in the everyday lives and interests of nearly all Australians. In the digital age, it would

be highly unusual for a young person curious about a topic *not* to search for it online. Even if young people do not deliberately search for extremist content, they may still be exposed to it. In a study by Costello et al., it was suggested that around 65 percent of young people surveyed had been exposed to hate material online over three months.⁵⁰ This was in a study of 1,034 random survey respondents, rather than extremists, but nonetheless demonstrates the frequency of exposure in the general population.

In terms of offline engagement, recruiters appear to have engaged with young people at school or home environments, and provided young people with attention, validation and a sense of community. In one chilling tale, a young person was groomed by the parents of their peers while still in primary school, and later taught how to surveil targets and fight. In another case, the young person was groomed online and groomed other younger people themselves. There is considerable complexity to this issue, and it is erroneous to focus on the online environment to the exclusion of the offline environment. Much like the perverse outcomes of the stranger danger phrase (which overlooked the data that children were more likely to be harmed by someone they knew), it is important to recognise that extremists are not always anonymous users on social media, but can be friends, family, or the parents of peers. The recruitment of young Australians is best conceptualised as a free-from-engagement environment, with no standard recruitment process or dynamic.

Both Foreign and Familiar

A similar misconception exists with respect to the shadowy international terror threat. The Australian list of terrorist organisations is dominated by international threats such as Islamic State, al Qaeda, and Abu Sayyaf Group. Only three XRW organisations are listed in Australia (The Base, Sonnenkrieg Division, and National Socialist Order, formerly Atomwaffen Division).⁵¹ It is rarer still for domestic organisations to be listed, even when members of these domestic organisations are facing trial for acts that meet the terrorism offence threshold. This indicates an overwhelming focus in the national security posture towards listing internationally-based organisations and networks, but not domestic organisations. This further allows for presumptions about what can, and can not, be done about the recruitment of young people in terms of jurisdictional reach.

In contradiction to this security posture, this research emphasises the significance of domestic organisations and vectors for recruitment. Young people might support foreign terrorist organisations, but it is uncommon for them to have direct and exclusive contact with these organisations. Instead, deliberate recruitment could be identified through domestic organisations, in social, educational, or familial settings. To restate this, a third of the XRW cohort and a quarter of the VSJ cohort demonstrated seemingly exclusive engagement with domestic organisations, compared to international engagement which was 11 percent and 12.5 percent, respectively. For the rest (44 percent XRW and 37.5 percent VSJ), it was unknown. In some cases, both transnational and domestic engagement was indicated (25 percent VSJ, 11 percent XRW). This suggests that domestic organisations and networks should not be trivialised or overlooked. Given the targets of extremist recruitment are young Australians, targeted substantively by Australian extremist entities, it would seem logical that such entities be considered for listing as a mechanism to inform the public and deter engagement.

Domestic entities can and do play impactful roles in engaging young people in extremism. This impact may be more marked when considering the role of the family and family environments. The role of the direct social environment, such as family, was highlighted by practitioners. Blake noted in one instance where the father's views were in close alignment with the young person's; Morgan also noted that the families could be quite anti-government; while Rory states

that young people can be highly influenced by male role models such as fathers, brothers, and uncles. Also, according to Quinn:

The other thing upon reflection would probably be that in a lot of those cases, they retrospectively identify that they also did have a family member who potentially was of a certain ideological view, but at that time they didn't understand what that was. Being they're young, they don't know about ideology, but when someone explains it to them and gives them examples of what that looks like, they can then look back and, reflectively, they then talk about, 'Oh, actually my dad and my uncle were quite like that, but I didn't realise that at the time.' Or, 'On my mum's side of the family, my grandmother was very much about—this is a certain type of ideology.' But it was not talked about as an ideology. It was just this is what she believes in. Or the dad and uncle—this is just what they've done because that's what their dad did.

Quinn highlights well the likelihood of young people being more accepting of the beliefs of their parents or family. This is hardly a deviation from the broader Australian public, where young people are frequently involved by their families in political causes. In Australia, a young person cannot be seen as politically responsible or mature until the age of eighteen, so it is unrealistic to expect young people to be able to immediately identify potentially extremist beliefs in their family or social environments, and reject them.

The role of the family was not universal, according to the practitioners. The variability of this was highlighted by Alex, who said, “there’s definitely some clients where there’s someone in the family that has shared the beliefs. But I’d say, there’s just as many where either there was just limited to no close connections within the family...” This was supported by Taylor, who provided more detail on the variability of that direct social environment:

Some of them have been familial...the one I was saying who was raised by [...their] uncles. I don't even know if they were actual uncles or not. Another client was married to somebody who really compelled...[them] to commit an act of ideological extremism, violence.

As this suggests, the reality of young people engaging in extremism in Australia is that there can, and may be, family endorsement, awareness, or in some cases, normalisation of extremism. The engagement of young people is not purely initiated by predatory foreign recruiters on behalf of prominent terror organisations: sometimes, it is in the family. At other times, it exists within the immediate environment of the young person, and the young person may not have the political maturity or power to identify the organisation or its beliefs as aberrant to the Australian mainstream.

Naiveté and Vulnerability

The stereotype of happy families with no knowledge of their young person’s extremism is a simplistic view. Family often plays a significant role in a young person’s engagement with extremism. This was a persistent theme which manifested both in the file reviews and the interviews with practitioners. This is also highlighted by Harris-Hogan and Harris-Hogan and Barelle in studies that argue the role of family or peer relationships are key to understanding jihadist network evolution in the Australian context.⁵² Our research suggests there is considerable complexity to the young person’s ecosystem which informs their overall susceptibility and potential engagement pathway. This susceptibility is informed by numerous (and often comorbid) vulnerabilities inherent to both the young demographic, and the power differentials which may be at play.

As was indicated in the Findings, the cohorts examined in this research present multiple intersecting vulnerabilities, which range from personal experiences of victimisation and abuse, unstable living or family conditions, adverse childhood experiences and trauma, neurodiversity, mental health issues, and so on. These young people have fewer protective factors than others, which may speak to their being targeted for recruitment or naiveté about what they were being recruited into. The practitioners, for example, reported that the young people did not realise that they were becoming socialised to an ideology, or recognise they were being recruited deliberately. Some were unaware, not only of their recruitment, but of the very idea that their conduct was unlawful. Online spaces contributed to the normalisation of some of this conduct. This was identified by Quinn, who explained:

Everybody meets somebody online at some point. So it's not considered an unusual thing to occur. But I don't know that they can also then take it the next step further and identify exactly what it was within that conversation that hooked them or was that next step that was actually—achieving that pathway to recruitment. I don't know if they can identify that.

Rory also commented: “I’m not even sure if they know the truth themselves.” Young, vulnerable Australians may be said to be naive to the circumstances that lead to their recruitment, and the motives of the recruiters themselves. This highlights another aspect: such vulnerable young people cannot be expected to understand, identify, or necessarily control the circumstances that led to their engagement in extremism. At the time of writing, it is not a crime in Australia for an adult to recruit a child to a terrorist organisation. To expect (or seek to build) resilience in the young person overlooks the agency, power and relative impunity of the predatory adult recruiter.

Conclusion

This research sought to illuminate underexamined considerations in the recruitment of young Australians to extremism. It has been argued that there are a number of intersecting and often comorbid vulnerabilities in a young person and their ecosystem, which renders them more susceptible to recruitment by extremist organisations. Our findings, albeit limited, have challenged stereotypes about young people engaged in extremism, and detailed the difficulties within their personal, social and environmental contexts. We have further highlighted the significance of naivety among this young cohort, and sought to synthesise this within context. While no typical recruitment pathway for young Australians was identified, we have aimed to highlight the ongoing relevance of domestic organisations in addition to international organisations, with further encouragement for the listing of domestic entities. We aimed to illuminate that while extremist ideologies are often considered foreign, in many cases, they are familiar to young people through direct relationships.

Further, this study challenges the focus applied to online extremism in Australian professional security discourse, as demonstrated by the 2024 Parliamentary inquiry noted above. In contrast to this focus on online, we have demonstrated domestic and offline factors nevertheless remain an important part of the recruitment vortex, and well within the Australian jurisdictional reach to confront. Both online and offline environments are important to the recruitment of young people: it is not simply a social media problem. Given the expanse of this problem within the Australian domestic context, we encourage policymakers to utilise the existing tools at the disposal to deter the recruiters from targeting vulnerable young Australians. Finally, this study may also support and inform understandings of youth engagement with extremism in other

comparable jurisdictions and practice contexts. Ultimately, more research is needed both in Australia and beyond to comprehend the nuance of engagement and work towards better disengagement outcomes for vulnerable young people.

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