Seen But Not Heard

How Evaluation Misses Youth Realities in Extremism Prevention

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If You Only Read One Page

1 Youth radicalization is rising, posing a growing threat to public safety worldwide. Extremists are deliberately targeting young people and at a decreasing age.

2 Based on interviews with 14 experts from 7 countries, this study provides an overview of trends in youth radicalization and takes stock of current youth-focused efforts to prevent and counter extremism (P/CVE) and related evaluations.

3 While extremists creatively adapt their radicalization approaches to exploit youth-specific vulnerabilities, P/CVE often struggle to reach youth effectively. In many countries, P/CVE efforts remain too securitized, top-down, or miss youth-specific drivers of radicalization entirely.

4 Due to their methodology and design, evaluations frequently fail to detect these problems and, worse, can endanger young people during vulnerable phases of identity development.

5 Effective evaluation of youth-focused P/CVE requires approaches fundamentally different from those used with adults. Evaluations must be age-appropriate, based on indicators that measure protective and resilience-building effects, conducted by trusted adults, and measured over the course of many years.

Introduction

Youth radicalization is on the rise, posing an increasing threat to public safety worldwide and putting a growing cohort of youth at risk. This trend was one of the findings of an international monitoring survey conducted by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in fall 2024.[1] Many extremist groups deliberately target young people, exploiting their specific vulnerabilities and cultivating the ideological foundations to ensure and strengthen the future existence and growth of their movements. The expansion of access to digital spaces has accelerated these dynamics, allowing extremist messages to reach young people in the intimacy of their screens.[2] In response, programs to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) across the globe have made youth[3] radicalization a central focus of their efforts. To ensure these P/CVE efforts are effective, rigorous evaluations are essential; they help identify what works within extremism prevention projects, programs and policies — and what does not.[4]

Despite the growing attention and funding P/CVE has received since the early 2000s, efforts to evaluate P/CVE have remained limited. This gap is especially striking for youth programming, even though young people have been made central to P/CVE efforts. Literature and research-based guidance on best practices for youth-focused evaluations are still scarce.[5] This stands in stark contrast to what evaluation practitioners need to do their work well: specific, research-based and youth-focused P/CVE approaches are crucial to address the distinct challenges that come with youth radicalization, including the need to adapt to the psycho-developmental stage of the young people they address. Evaluations must account for these specific needs to adequately assess the effectiveness of youth-focused P/CVE programs.[6] In a world where extremist groups and movements are investing heavily in recruiting young people for their destructive causes, falling behind on evaluating what best prevents youth radicalization could have serious consequences — not only in terms of violence fueled by extremist ideologies, but also in accelerating broader societal fragmentation due to the proliferation of extremist ideas.

Falling behind on evidence of what best prevents youth radicalization could have serious consequences.

Based on semi-structured interviews with 14 experts from 7 countries (Canada, Czechia, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Spain, Tunisia) as well as several background conversations with experts from Germany and Australia during the process of designing the interview guide, this report provides a cross-country overview of current trends in youth

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[1] Sofie Lilli Stoffel, Sarah Bressan, Lea Marlene Korb, "Holding Ground in Preventing Violent Extremism: Evidence and Trends in Evaluation from 12 Countries," *Global Public Policy Institute*, 2025, https://gppi.net/2025/08/12/holding-ground-in-preventing-violent-extremism.

[2] Ibid.; Sofie Lilli Stoffel, "Kein Kinderspiel," *Internationale Politik*, 2025, https://internationalepolitik.de/de/kein-kinderspiel; Megan Norris, "Too Young to Drive, Old Enough for Extremism: Youth Radicalization's New Reality," *Homeland Security Today*, 2025, https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/border-security/too-young-to-drive-old-enough-for-extremism-youth-radicalizations-new-reality/; Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," *Vision of Humanity*, 2025, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/.

[3] For the purposes of this paper, "youth" is a term with fuzzy edges that predominantly refers to 15- to 24-year-olds, as per the definition used by the UN (resolution 36/28 of 1981), but it also includes younger ages (down to 11 years old) and older ages (up to 29 years old). Rather than using age as the dominating category, this report aims to talk about youth as a demographic that is still in the formative years of their physical and emotional development and for whom finding their place in society is a key determinant of their lived experiences and identity-building. For more information see section 2, "Defining 'Youth' in P/CVE."

[4] Sarah Bressan, Sophie Ebbecke, and Lotta Rahlf, "How Do We Know What Works in Preventing Violent Extremism? Evidence and Trends in Evaluation From 14 Countries," *Global Public Policy Institute*, 2024, https://gppi.net/2024/07/08/how-do-we-know-what-works-in-preventing-violent-extremism.

[5] Adrian Cherney, Kathleen De Rooy, and Ryan Williams, "An Evidence Review of Strategies Targeting Youth Who Have Radicalised to Violent Extremism," *Journal for Deradicalization*, No. 33, 2022, https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/667.

[6] Ibid.

radicalization, highlights the particular challenges and opportunities of P/CVE work with youth, and offers insights into what evaluations of such activities are still getting wrong, and how they can do better.[7] This study is part of the international, comparative component of the research and dialogue project "PrEval: Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Extremism Prevention, Democracy Promotion and Civic Education: Analysis, Monitoring, Dialogue," funded by the German Ministry of the Interior from September 2022 to December 2025. It builds on two international expert surveys conducted in 2023 and 2024.[8]

Across interviews and countries, three overarching findings stand out: (1) extremist groups are targeting increasingly younger groups in increasingly creative ways, (2) P/CVE efforts often struggle to reach youth effectively, because they remain too securitized, top-down, or ideologically focused, and (3) evaluation practices frequently overlook youth-specific needs, thereby missing critical drivers of vulnerability and failing to capture long-term developmental impact. These trends underscore an urgent need to rethink how success is defined and measured and, more generally, how P/CVE engages with youth.

This study suggests a number of starting points for how P/CVE evaluations can more accurately — and more ethically — capture the impact of youth-focused P/CVE. For starters, evaluations should be designed around youth-specific factors, using indicators that measure protective and resilience-building effects rather than measure radicalization or risk of violence, as these can heavily misconstrue results for youth. What's more, survey and interview methods must avoid endangering young people during vulnerable phases of identity development by asking suggestive questions or creating incentives that lead to distorted, overstated, or deliberately provocative responses. Evaluators should be trusted adults that know youth and their lived realities well — third-party evaluations are less likely to yield useful results. Because meaningful change for youth unfolds over key developmental stages, short-term, security-driven timelines cannot capture true impact; instead, evaluations should focus on protective and resilience factors and ideally track outcomes over many years.

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[7] Interviewees were partly selected from the respondent pool of PrEval's international monitoring survey (see Bressan, Ebbecke, and Rahlf, "How Do We Know What Works", 2024, and Stoffel, Bressan, and Korb, "Holding Ground", 2025) in countries where youth emerged as a particularly salient issue. Additional experts were identified through snowball sampling, especially when initial contacts lacked youth-specific expertise. All interviews were semi-structured and followed the flow of the survey. Given the sensitivity of P/CVE work — particularly where it concerns underage beneficiaries — interviewees were offered the option to designate any information as off the record. They were informed that selected statements might be quoted verbatim but that all responses would remain anonymous. Interview notes were inductively coded using MaxQDA, and, where possible, statements were triangulated with additional literature. The findings are exploratory in nature due to the limited evidence base and the number of interviewees, which does not allow for sustained claims about any individual country context.

[8] Bressan, Ebbecke, and Rahlf, "How Do We Know What Works;" Stoffel, Bressan, and Korb, "Holding Ground."

Defining Youth in P/CVE

Who qualifies as 'youth' varies widely across cultural contexts. Unlike the demographic category of 'child,' defined as anyone under 18 according to the globally signed 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there is no universally agreed-upon definition of youth. Instead, the term relies on a shared general understanding of a youth as a

Who qualifies as 'youth' varies widely across cultural contexts.

young person who has gained some independence but is still growing, changing, and finding their place in life. What this developmental stage looks like, however, differs significantly across societies and individual circumstances. A 13-year-old who heads a household and cares for younger siblings may have far more in common with a 25-year-old in similar conditions than with another 13-year-old whose daily life revolves around school, homework and extracurricular activities.

International experts interviewed for this study likewise use differing definitions of youth in their work, as shown in Table 1. What all these concepts share is a certain overlap with the age-range of childhood; many interviewees defined the upper age boundary of youth as 18, the end of childhood. In some contexts, however, youth is understood more as a social category than an age range. For example, interviewees working in Tunisia and Kenya noted that this category is often associated with widespread unemployment among young people, which limits their economic independence, delays next steps in their living situation, and, in turn, shapes their social status. Depending on the socio-economic and cultural context, 'youth' could include anyone in their early teen years all the way up to their thirties.

Given this wide array of definitions and the complexity of pathways to, and away from, youth extremism, this paper intentionally avoids adopting a fixed age range. Instead, when discussing youth in P/CVE, we treat the category as having fuzzy edges. We use the UN's definition of youth (15 to 24 years old) as this study's demographic core and include younger individuals (down to age 11) and older ones (up to age 30) where applicable.

Table 1. How 'youth' is defined in experts' P/CVE and evaluation work in different countries

	Definition of 'youth' according to P/CVE and evaluation experts
Canada	Mostly older children, but under the age of 18. In P/CVE, this definition often expands to 24/25-year-olds, sometimes even 29 years old, to account for different paths into adulthood.
Czechia	Mostly older children, but under the age of 18. In P/CVE, this can expand to young adults.
Indonesia	In P/CVE and evaluation, 10 to 18, sometimes up to 24 years old. Statistical agencies work with the UN definition, 15 to 24 years old. Other civil society organizations work with older youth groups, 16 to 30/35 years old.
Kenya	Mostly 14 to 35 years old. P/CVE youth programs mostly target people in their 20s. The development sector defines youth as 18 to 30 years, which is the context in which most P/CVE work takes place.
The Netherlands	Mostly 12 to 18 years old.
Spain	Mostly 14 to 18 years old, span between minimum legal boundary for criminal persecution and end of childhood protections.
Tunisia	Mostly older children, as well as young adults up to the age of 24/25 years old or even 30/35 years old. In P/CVE, minors are rarely included in youth programs, who more typically tackle 18 to 25 years or even up to 30/35 years old.

Source: Semi-structured interviews with 14 experts from 7 countries (Canada, Czechia, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Spain, Tunisia).

Trends in Youth Radicalization

The following section provides an overview of current trends in youth radicalization, highlighting the strategies extremist groups and movements use to reach youth. Interviewed experts attributed the recent rise in youth radicalization to the increasing ability of extremist groups to meet young people where they're at, tailoring their strategies to young people's lived realities in a convincing manner. This trend is evident along two dimensions: extremist recruiters are both targeting younger youth and are increasingly using youth-appropriate methods and activities to exploit their specific vulnerabilities and needs.

Extremist Actors Target Increasingly Younger Youth

A particularly troubling development across contexts is that young people holding extremist views, engaging with violent propaganda, or even being prosecuted for terrorism offenses, are becoming increasingly younger.[9] Pre-teens and young teenagers — typically starting at around age 11 — are at a pivotal stage of their psychological development. At this age, children begin to form their own moral code, identity and views of society and authority, often questioning the norms and expectations they have been taught.[10] This developmental disposition means that when young people are exposed to extremist narratives during this phase, these narratives can have a disproportionately large impact, shaping their sense of right and wrong and influencing how they interpret the world. The natural tendencies typical at this age — such as sensation-seeking, using strong opinions to elicit feedback, and a heightened search for belonging — further increase their vulnerability to extremist messaging. As a result, radicalization can progress much more rapidly in pre-teens and young teenagers than in older youth or adults, and it may become more deeply embedded in their identity and worldview, with great long-term effects.

> **Radicalization can progress much more rapidly in pre-teens and young teenagers than in older youth or adults.**

Interviewees noted how deeply certain extremist views have taken hold among very young age groups. Experts explained that in Indonesia, for example, high school teachers in some areas reported that up to 75 percent of "their students are already indoctrinated," sharing and promoting radical Islamist ideas. In Spain, an interviewee highlighted a particular feedback loop between radical right-wing and Islamist extremism among youth, with each reinforcing the fears and grievances that make the other appealing to young people. Given teenagers' developmental stage, their tendency toward bold, sensation-seeking actions, countering these views with more balanced or fact-based narratives does not always work well. The observations of the experts interviewed for this study are backed by aggregated data: several European countries as well as Australia reported that minors accounted for 20-30 percent of all terrorism charges in 2024. In France, this percentage represented a ninefold increase compared to 2022.[11] In 2025, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) also reported that they encounter children with violent extremist beliefs more often every year.[12]

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[9] Thomas Renard, "Adolescent Radicalisation: It's Not Just on Netflix," *European Commission*, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/home/items/880571/en#:~:text=Radicalisation%20is%20affecting%20minors%20at%20alarming%20rates%20across,disturbing%20rise%20in%20youth%20involvement%20in%20violent%20extremism; Norris, "Too Young to Drive, Old Enough for Extremism"; Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security."

[10] Stanford Medicine, "Cognitive Development in the Teen Years," accessed November 15, 2025, https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=cognitive-development-in-the-teen-years-90-P01594.

[11] Renard, "Adolescent Radicalisation."

[12] Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Beyond Belief: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in America," 2025, https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/reports-and-publications/beyond-belief-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-america.pdf/view.

It is important to note, however, that even as youth radicalization has increased and the targeted demographic has grown younger, extremist groups have become less likely to recruit minors to carry out violent political acts. In Indonesia, for example, interviewed experts reported that Islamist groups have concluded that the legal risks and public backlash associated with child recruitment are not worth the cost. Instead, they seek to bind young people to their networks at a vulnerable age, intending to mobilize them later.

Interviewees also cautioned that young people's propensity for violence is often overstated, even when they do hold extremist views.[13] As one respondent from Norway noted in GPPi's 2024 survey, "in our country, the police and security services currently have high attention to young adults and minors radicalized through right-wing extremist digital arenas. I'm afraid we overlook adults with higher capacity of violence."[14]

Extremist Actors Exploit Youth's Needs and Vulnerabilities

Ideology typically plays a much smaller role in a person's path toward violent extremism than many stakeholders and the broader public assume. The drivers of extremism can be grouped into three categories: (1) structural factors, such as state repression, political exclusion and injustices (real or perceived), (2) individual incentives, including trauma, economic/security pressures and extreme religious, racist, misogynistic, or anti-government beliefs, and (3) enabling factors, such as exposure to radical recruiters or the prevailing attitudes within a person's online or offline social networks.[15] As one interviewee from Kenya put it, ideology is merely "a vehicle that brings grievances to their destination."

Factors making extremism appealing to youth are usually rooted in everyday experiences, directly shaping their world, and less by abstract grievances about more general global injustices.

Input from interviewed experts as well as research evidence demonstrate that the younger a child, the less significant ideology is as a driver of radicalization. Beyond ideology, risk factors for youth radicalization include psychological vulnerabilities, perceived injustice, social disconnection, and identity uncertainty, according to a review of European studies.[16] A study of teenagers in Germany demonstrated that being male and having a sense of relative disadvantage and social deprivation were the two strongest predictors of right-wing beliefs.[17] Interviewed experts explained that the younger youth are, the less likely they are to be motivated by specific beliefs and the more likely they are to be drawn to what extremism seems to offer for their lived reality, emotional needs or sense of identity. Interviewees from Canada, Kenya and the Netherlands emphasized that the factors making extremism appealing to youth are usually rooted in everyday experiences, directly shaping their world, and less by abstract grievances about more general global injustices. Risk factors in youth realities include poverty and unemployment, rigid social expectations for their lives and behavior, discrimination, and other forms of real or perceived injustice, such as treatment by figures of authority (e.g., teachers, parents or the police).

Interviewed experts also noted that in many societies, many youth feel that they have little control over their lives and are under high pressure to conform to social expectations. In

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Stoffel, Bressan, and Korb, "Holding Ground."

[15] Abigail Watson, "Beyond Religion Learning From the Shift Toward a Wider Understanding of Extremism in P/CVE Programming," *Global Public Policy Institute*, 2025, 20251010_PrEval-Policy-Brief_AbiWatson_Formatted_FINAL.pdf.

[16] Nicolas Campelo, Alice Oppetit, Françoise Neau, David Cohen, and Guillaume Bronsard, "Who are the European youths willing to engage in radicalisation? A multidisciplinary review of their psychological and social profiles," *European Psychiatry* 52 (2018) 1–14, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eurpsy.2018.03.001.

[17] Carl Philipp Schröder, Jannik Bruns, Lena Lehmann, Laura-Romina Goede, Thomas Bliesener, and Samuel Tomczyk, "Radicalization in Adolescence: the Identification of Vulnerable Groups," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 28 (2022), 177-201, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-022-09505-x.

contexts where children and youth are expected to be *seen but not heard*, where they have no meaningful role in decision-making, and where their needs are routinely sidelined, feelings of disenfranchisement and social exclusion can emerge very early. This sense of not belonging — in their community or society more broadly — creates fertile ground for extremist groups to exploit.[18]

Extremist actors increasingly tailor their recruitment strategies to exploit exactly these desires, needs and vulnerabilities. A Spanish interviewee explained that the messaging of extremist groups deliberately targets young people's desire for personal significance and to be heard. Interviewees from Kenya and Indonesia offered concrete examples of how this plays out in practice, with extremist actors offering youth purpose, belonging and a listening ear. An expert in Kenya described interviewing returnees from the Islamist group *Al-Shabaab,* who signed up believing that they were applying to study at a university, only to find themselves in Somalia working and fighting for *Al-Shabaab* instead.

> **Extremist actors increasingly tailor their recruitment strategies to young people's needs and preferences.**

An interviewed expert from Canada noted that extremist groups have gained an edge in youth recruitment through their creativity and by "going to where the youth are, both physically and online." In Indonesia, radical Islamist groups have built strong ties to high schools — often through alumni who serve as contact points — and organize school activities, such as Islamic study circles and extracurricular programs. Boys are invited to participate in "nature reflections," camping and trekking trips where they are gradually exposed to extremist doctrine, while girls participate in other recreational activities. In Kenya, *Al-Shabaab* embeds itself in places where young people spend their free time, offering low-barrier entry points for engagement. One interviewee explained how recruiters blend seamlessly into youth environments: "Security forces chase people with long beards and Islamic capes, but I would be more worried about those with hoodies and caps." Interestingly, the group also engages with communities that typically are not considered to be in conformance with religious teachings — including criminal networks and sex workers — to draw young people into its orbit.

Social media and other online platforms have further increased young people's exposure to highly targeted extremist content and contact opportunities with extremist groups, unconstrained by geography.[19] Interviewees from Czechia and Spain reported that in their contexts, the internet has become the dominant pathway for youth radicalization. The cost-effectiveness of online content allows extremist actors to disseminate their messaging widely and reach young people more easily, making youth an even more significant target group than before digital spaces became mainstream.

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Algorithms and echo chambers facilitate the precise delivery of extremist content to the young audiences it is designed to reach, pulling them into networks of like-minded users, as interviewees from Canada and the Netherlands emphasized. They also noted that one of the broader drivers of youth radicalization — loneliness and social isolation — is particularly pronounced among youth who get radicalized online. Algorithms make it easy for individuals to quickly feel a sense of belonging to the groups and accounts that appear each time they log on, accelerating the pull of extremist networks.[20]

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[18] Claudia Wallner, "The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism," *Royal United Services Institute*, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep49061.5

[19] Wallner, "The Contested Relationship," 2021.

[20] Ibid; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Beyond Belief," 2025.

Taking Stock of Youth-Focused P/CVE and Evaluation

The following section outlines the current state of P/CVE and evaluation, assessing whether current extremism prevention initiatives are equipped to counter the worrisome trends in youth radicalization and if evaluation is helping to highlight what works — and what doesn't — in those efforts. P/CVE is a relatively young field, and its focus on youth is even more recent; our interviewees noted that the field only started to pay special attention to youth and its implications for extremism prevention 10 to 15 years ago. Given this limited tenure, it is not so surprising that many youth-focused P/CVE approaches still fall short of meeting young people's developmental needs. While there are certainly projects and practices that are incorporating a youth-sensitive lens, interviewees emphasized that the prevailing approaches are age-agnostic; as a result, their P/CVE interventions are designed in such a way that they can be ineffective or even harmful for young participants. The same patterns appear in evaluation designs, which means that evaluations have so far been unable to generate systematic evidence that would reveal some of the more serious shortcomings in youth-focused P/CVE.

Missed Windows, Missed Voices: Why Early and Age-Sensitive Extremism Prevention Matters

Despite young people's specific needs and vulnerabilities, P/CVE mostly applies age-agnostic approaches. Even though interviewees across all contexts reported that P/CVE programming primarily targets youth, very few activities actually involve minors, meaning those under 18. The legal requirements and the need to secure consent from parents or guardians are often too burdensome for implementers. Ethical constraints and "do-no-harm" obligations are also more stringent when working with minors, especially in highly sensitive P/CVE settings where participation itself could stigmatize teenagers as potential offenders. However, once a young person reaches their mid-20s, their worldview and self-perception have largely been formed. And because extremist recruiters do not respect the 18-year threshold, older youth may already have been exposed to radical ideas for several years. Once someone becomes entrenched in an extremist group — even a loosely organized one — additional power dynamics and economic dependencies make intervention and disengagement increasingly difficult. Just as radicalization is more effective at earlier ages, P/CVE interventions are far more successful when they occur early as well, as one interviewee from Canada stressed. Several interviewed experts warned that programs targeting young adults — or even 17- to 18-year-olds — may simply come too late.

In many contexts, youth-focused P/CVE is organized within the national security domain, a positioning that can endanger young people and create additional push factors toward extremism. Interviewees from Indonesia, Tunisia, Czechia, and Kenya noted that security imperatives often drive decisions and resource allocation within P/CVE decision-making, overshadowing considerations of youth well-being. When prevention efforts label participants as potential offenders, young people face risks of social stigmatization and exclusion, which further drive radicalization and recruitment. Such labeling can also shape negative self-perceptions during a critical phase of identity development, making extremist content feel familiar and extremist groups appear like places where they might belong, as the interviewed experts noted.

As discussed above, expressing strong or even extreme opinions (especially those perceived as rebellious) is a natural part of adolescence. When these behaviors are met with immediate involvement from security authorities or broad social rejection, this societal reaction can reinforce the very dynamics extremist recruiters exploit. Experiences of oppression are closely linked to radicalization, as interviewees in Tunisia observed firsthand: mass arrests of young people protesting (perceived) social injustices in recent years have been used to fuel extremist narratives. In Kenya, interviewees report that radical Islamist groups have gained traction among young people by positioning themselves as one of the few actors openly calling out abusive police practices against those labeled as potential terrorist offenders — and by offering a way to push back.

Just as a national-security lens can backfire in youth-focused P/CVE, an overt emphasis on ideology can also undermine effectiveness. Among young people, even more than adults, extreme views are not necessarily indicators of violent intent; they may instead reflect attempts to communicate grievances or test social boundaries. Conversely, instances of mass violence perpetrated by youth can occur without ideological motivation — as demonstrated by the 2023 mass shooting at Charles University in Prague, which was not driven by an ideological motivation but nonetheless inspired copycat threats from high-school students, although further attacks were prevented.

Interviewees noted that P/CVE programming aimed at shifting ideological positions — even indirectly — can unintentionally reinforce extremist tendencies. When young people adopt extreme views to test limits or fulfill sensation-seeking impulses, attempts to impose values or vilify specific ideologies can prompt them to double down. In many contexts, youth, and especially younger teenagers, are accustomed to being treated top-down and excluded from decision-making. P/CVE approaches that replicate this paternalism risk repeating this dynamic and thereby deepening feelings of isolation and powerlessness that extremist groups exploit by presenting themselves as spaces where youth matter.

Top-down interventions that do not engage with youth and their lived realities can recreate the very conditions extremist actors exploit.

A top-down approach that overlooks young people's lived realities can also create indirect and unintended harm. In Indonesia, interviewees explained how, after completing certain P/CVE interventions, federal authorities will hand young people back to the local authorities without transferring crucial information about their care. This leaves them feeling abandoned and, ultimately, returns them to the same conditions from which they were recruited, heightening already existing vulnerabilities and increasing their risk of relapse. Experts described a similar dynamic in Tunisia: there, P/CVE initiatives often deliberately engage women to extract information about their husbands, sons or brothers, simultaneously ignoring that women themselves may hold extremist views and reinforcing damaging stereotypes of the 'dangerous young Muslim man.' The latter feeds social tensions and perceived injustices — themselves drivers of extremism and recruitment. Both examples show how top-down interventions that do not engage with youth and their lived realities directly can misread local dynamics, fuel feelings of injustice, and ultimately recreate the very conditions extremist groups exploit.

How can P/CVE avoid these fallacies? What would an effective and proper age-sensitive approach to P/CVE look like? For one, interviewed experts stressed that radicalized opinions should be treated as "the tip of the iceberg" (interviewee from the Netherlands). Effective P/CVE must "work with youth, not against youth" (interviewee from Spain) to address the underlying issues below the surface: social and family challenges, major life events, psychological difficulties, discrimination, or unemployment.[21] Rather than relying on external staff to deliver ideology-focused interventions, programs should be led by adults whom youth trust, whether that be because they have faced and overcome similar struggles or because they

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[21] Wallner, "The Contested Relationship," 2021.

are trained to provide holistic support, such as youth social workers. As one interviewee from Kenya noted, a key reason P/CVE often falls short is that this type of highly effective, individualized, trust-based care is not easily scalable and therefore less attractive to funders. Although easily "scalable," one-size-fits-all approaches are often ineffective or end up backfiring. Funders should, therefore, rethink this prioritization of scalability and invest in P/CVE approaches that are sensitive to age-related conditions and vulnerabilities.

Holistic models help ensure that prevention is rooted in trust, support and participation rather than surveillance or control.

P/CVE interventions should strive to help young people recognize their own agency and create space for genuine youth participation. Our interviewees noted some best practices across different national contexts. In Kenya, for example, one interviewee described how an intervention simply amplified what young people were already doing to block recruitment attempts: it supported youth in filming short videos about their personal struggles and why they chose not to engage with extremist groups. These videos were then shared on social media, reinforcing youth-led resilience. Another community-level project in Kenya trained young people in civic engagement and taught them how to insert their voices into local decision-making processes. In the Netherlands, P/CVE is often not a standalone program but integrated into broader youth care. Social workers embedded in communities support young people facing difficult life circumstances, addressing mental health, daily challenges, and, when needed, early signs of radicalization. Such a holistic model helps ensure that prevention is rooted in trust, support and participation rather than surveillance or control.

P/CVE Evaluations: Part of the Problem?

Ideally, evaluation — the systematic assessment of activities and interventions — should expose the flaws and fallacies in youth-focused P/CVE design mentioned above.[22] However, our interviewees found that evaluation methods often *replicate* those same shortcomings limiting program effectiveness. They also fail to generate systematic evidence on how to do youth-focused P/CVE well, making evaluations part of the larger problem.

Evaluations fail to generate systematic evidence on how to do youth-focused P/CVE well, making evaluations part of the larger problem.

Systematic evaluations of youth-focused P/CVE are rare and constrained by limited funding. Interviewees from Canada, Czechia, and Indonesia noted that many of the evaluations that do exist are superficial and emphasize easily collected metrics rather than actual impact — an observation that aligns with broader findings from GPPi's international monitoring surveys on P/CVE (see *Holding Ground in Preventing Extremism,* Stoffel, Bressan, Korb 2025). Even more than age-agnostic P/CVE evaluations, evaluations of youth-focused P/CVE are limited. A Spanish interviewee pointed out that the youth space remains underexplored, with only a small handful of systematic evaluations having been done over the last decade. A Canadian interviewee remarked that they had "never seen an evaluation that has accounted for the difference between youth and adults in terms of developmental status." This lack is troubling; all interviewed experts agreed that age-appropriate methods are essential for conducting effective and ethical evaluations of youth-focused P/CVE.

Evaluation Indicators

Using age-agnostic indicators to measure whether or not a certain P/CVE intervention was effective can have certain negative knock-on effects. Choosing a national security framework

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[22] Stoffel, Bressan, and Korb, "Holding Ground," 2025.

as the base for an evaluation, for example, can impair evaluation efforts; evaluation indicators derived from scales of ideological radicalization can undermine both the effectiveness of evaluation and the safety of youth participants. An interviewee from Indonesia noted that evaluation indicators are often used interchangeably for adult- and youth-focused activities and "don't factor in youth-specific challenges." Yet these youth-specific challenges (like isolation or unemployment) often function as the primary drivers of youth extremism, especially among younger age groups for whom ideology plays an even smaller role.

Age-appropriate methods are essential for conducting effective and ethical evaluations of youth-focused P/CVE.

Using "risk of violence" as the primary outcome measure in evaluating prevention activities often skews results for youth. Following the course of natural maturation, a young person's "risk levels" tend to rise as he or she grows older and their lives become more complex — regardless of any P/CVE intervention. As a Canadian interviewee emphasized, a 12-year-old who enters a program and is assessed again at 16 will inevitably score higher on risk assessments, making it impossible to "measure youth for how radicalized they are." Moreover, as explained above, younger demographics are generally less likely to be mobilized to violence, even if they are radicalized. Risk of violence should, therefore, not necessarily be the primary concern when assessing if an intervention was effective in putting youth on a different path.

Instead, evaluations for youth should focus on protective and resilience factors, which require a different set of indicators. Useful indicators might include whether or not the program has strengthened a young person's social support network, improved their perceived support, or enhanced the quality of their relationships. These indicators could be measured, for example, through multidimensional social support scales, interviews or focus groups. Evaluators can also examine participants' awareness of community resources, the services they now know how to access, and their sense of having gained tools and support they did not have before.

Evaluation Methods

Evaluation methods, too, can impact the effectiveness of youth-focused P/CVE evaluations. Short timeframes, with evaluations measuring impact over the course of one to a maximum of three years, are the norm. Effective youth-focused P/CVE, however, may require much longer horizons. Programs often need to last longer to support young people through vulnerable developmental phases. And even shorter interventions may only reveal their true impact as participants grow into fully independent adults. Ideally, evaluations would track outcomes over five to ten years. However, most interviewed experts reported that they had never encountered such youth-centered, longitudinal evaluation designs. Indeed, we could not find any such evaluation currently underway.

What's more, evaluation methods can hurt the youth they aim to protect: evaluations using anonymized surveys with age-agnostic, pre-set questions can be harmful when not approached with youth sensitivity and produce skewed, biased, or overly simplified results. Just as prevention activities can stigmatize young people and negatively shape their self-perception, poorly framed evaluation questions can have similar effects. Questions centered on violence or radicalization may make youth feel targeted or confronted and can retraumatize those who already face significant discrimination in their daily lives. When surveys or focus groups foreground such narratives, evaluators are also unlikely to receive measured or honest responses from youth — trust is a prerequisite for meaningful insight.

Because the role and status of youth vary widely across societies, evaluation questions should be developed in close collaboration with implementers and community representatives who understand both the beneficiaries and the realities of their daily lives, including cultural context. An interviewed expert from the Netherlands also highlighted the value of game-based evaluation methods, which work particularly well in classroom settings. These approaches

allow teachers to be present and reduce the formality and intimidation often associated with P/CVE evaluation, helping youth feel more at ease and more willing to share openly. Interviewees highlighted that evaluators often underestimate the capacity of young people, and when given a format that allows them to speak freely, young participants often have far more to say than funders or evaluators assume.

Evaluators and Locations

Beyond indicators and methods, a third dimension of evaluation design that can have adverse effects on both the effectiveness of the evaluation and its youth participants is *who* conducts an evaluation and *where* it takes place.

Self-evaluations by implementers who know the youth participants well tend to be more effective.

Experts from Kenya, Canada, Spain, and Tunisia all emphasized that the younger the target group, the more important it is for evaluations to be conducted face-to-face by trusted individuals in open-ended conversations. In contrast to recommendations for the broader P/CVE evaluation field, independent third-party evaluations are rarely ideal for youth-focused work. Instead, self-evaluations by implementers who know the youth participants well tend to be more effective. To ensure rigor and methodological soundness, an evaluation professional should serve as a consultant to guide the process, as is already best practice in some Canadian projects. Where third-party researchers are required (for example, when multiple projects must be compared across sites or over time), experts recommend involving P/CVE implementers as "participant observers." This allows evaluators to triangulate insights drawn directly from youth with the perspectives of practitioners who understand their daily realities and can contextualize findings.

The location of youth evaluations is similarly relevant: evaluations should take place in a well-known and trusted spot. Even when in-person focus groups are conducted, they often take place in hotels, event spaces or office buildings, especially in development contexts. An expert from Tunisia noted that they had "never seen truthful or nuanced results" from evaluations held in such settings. Young participants, who may rarely be invited to these spaces or may be experiencing them for the first time, tend to focus on the excitement of the environment and avoid giving negative feedback that could jeopardize the experience. Even in less 'cool' locations, unfamiliar or intimidating spaces discourage youth from opening up, particularly when evaluators are also unknown adults.

A Canadian expert stressed that evaluations of youth-focused P/CVE should always include an ethnographic component, observing programs in the spaces where they naturally take place. Well-run, holistic youth programs often generate their most meaningful impact at the margins of official activities: when staff pick participants up, drive them home, stay late to talk through a difficult experience, help with homework, or support them in navigating an administrative challenge.

Summary

Youth-appropriate evaluation depends on trust, context sensitivity, and developmental awareness.

In conclusion, effective evaluation of youth-focused P/CVE requires approaches fundamentally different from those used with adults, as age-agnostic methods can both distort findings and cause harm. Youth may respond to evaluation questions in unpredictable ways, seeking to provoke, withholding honest feedback in unfamiliar or intimidating settings, or internalizing labels implied by poorly framed questions. Evaluations must therefore "meet youth where they are," relying on trusted adults, conversational and adaptable formats, culturally grounded questions, and spaces familiar to young participants. Because meaningful change for youth

unfolds over key developmental stages, short-term, security-driven timelines cannot capture true impact. Instead, evaluations should focus on protective and resilience factors and ideally track outcomes over many years. Overall, youth-appropriate evaluation depends on trust, context sensitivity, and developmental awareness — conditions that are essential both for ethical practice and for generating reliable evidence. While the experts interviewed for this study pointed out flaws that youth-focused P/CVE experiences across different cultural contexts, we will need youth-appropriate evaluation to shed light on systematic effectiveness of different approaches. To this end, evaluators need to truly hear, not just see, youth.

Recommendations

1 Use Age-Sensitive Evaluation Indicators

Evaluators should design evaluations that account for cognitive, emotional and social development stages rather than applying the standard, adult-focused frameworks. This means **funders** need to accept and push for indicators that measure protective factors, resilience-building, sense of belonging, and access to support. A national security framework risks overlooking youth-specific challenges — indicators based on ideological commitment or the risk of violence should be avoided, as they may undermine both the effectiveness of evaluation and the safety of youth participants.

2 Employ Flexible, Youth-Sensitive Methods

Wherever possible, **evaluators** should use open-ended, face-to-face conversations rather than standardized surveys, especially with younger youth. Evaluation designs should allow for flexibility so evaluators can adapt their questions to the youth's comfort level, language abilities and lived reality. Particular attention needs to be paid to narratives and framing in evaluations, minimizing risks of unintended harm.

3 Use Trusted Evaluators and Independent Evaluation Consulting

Data collection should be conducted by **evaluators** whom youth already trust: social workers, mentors, youth workers, or program staff. All evaluators should have dedicated training in pedagogy, youth social work or developmental psychology to ensure participants' safety. Where implementers lead evaluations, **funders** should provide resources for external evaluation consultants to ensure methodological rigor. When third-party evaluations are unavoidable, **evaluators** should involve **implementers** as "participant observers" to contextualize findings and triangulate results.

4 Conduct Evaluations in Familiar, Youth-Friendly Spaces

Evaluators should avoid holding focus groups, interviews, or surveys in hotels, offices, or formal buildings that intimidate youth or may lead to overly positive responses. Instead, evaluations should be conducted in the environments where programs naturally occur: youth centers, classrooms or community spaces. They could incorporate ethnographic observation to capture the impact of informal elements (e.g., transport, downtime, informal conversations).

5   Use Culturally Grounded, Context-Specific Question Design

Evaluators should co-design evaluation questions with **implementers** and **community representatives** who understand local youth realities. Question design should reflect the social roles, expectations and pressures youth face in their specific context. **Implementers** should flag cultural sensitivities and help avoid importing adult- or Western-centric assumptions about risk, resilience or agency. **Evaluators** should treat youth perspectives not merely as data points, but as essential insight for understanding program impact.

6   Focus on Long-Term, Developmental Impact

Funders should move beyond short-term evaluation cycles of one to two years and make long-term evaluation financially and logistically feasible. **Evaluators** should design tools that track developmental change over longer periods, while paying attention to youth-specific effects of development and transition into adulthood. **Implementers** should help maintain contact with youth over time and document signals of impact.

Acknowledgements

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